

NOTHING CAN SAVE “NOTHING SACRED”

Some things never change. The ratings for “Nothing Sacred” continue to plummet and the advertisers continue to flee. It has become increasingly obvious that nothing can save “Nothing Sacred.”

Throughout the fall, Kevin Anderson, a.k.a. Father Ray, kept complaining that the reason the show is a bomb is because it is up against the NBC Thursday night lineup, which includes “Friends.” Here is how he put it: “The biggest reason it hasn’t reached a wider audience is that it has been on at 8 o’clock Thursday night.”

ABC yielded to Anderson and moved the show to Saturday night. And guess what happened? The show broke its own record, pulling the smallest audience all season. This is no small feat, considering what it was up against: CBS offered a new cowboy show; NBC provided another one of those stupid “blooper” shows; and FOX aired a cop show that is broken into two parts. With all this going for it—to say nothing of the free hype it got from *TV Guide* the week before it aired (it flagged this episode three times)—Father Ray still couldn’t command an obedient flock.

Anderson then complained that 8 o’clock is too early for the show to be televised. Why? Because people are still frying eggs at that time. Think we’re kidding? Honest, here is what he said: “This is the kind of show where you’ve got to put the kids to bed [boy, is that telling!], you’ve got to have the dishes washed, you’ve got to sit back on the couch. You can’t be frying eggs looking over your shoulder and watching this show!”

So when “Nothing” fails in its new time slot on Saturday at

9:00 p.m. in March (ABC threw it off the air in February because of Sweeps month—it can't afford to lose everything!), we'll hear that viewers are too bombed at that hour, having fallen asleep on the couch. He'll be right in that assessment, but for reasons he'll never figure out.

It was announced in January that the show that follows "Nothing Sacred" on ABC, "Cracker," has been canceled. But Father Ray survives even though "Nothing's" ratings are almost identical to those that "Cracker" pulled. The difference is that Disney/ABC has no agenda at work in promoting "Cracker."

More bad news for "Nothing" fans: three more companies have withdrawn sponsorship of the show, bringing to 37 the number that have gone south. Add International Home Foods, Levitz and Van de Kamp to the list of sponsors that have quit.

Things are so bad that ABC made a last minute decision to cancel the January 31 episode of the show. That means that between the middle of December and the beginning of March, only two episodes were aired. None of this, however, has stopped the critics from raving about the show. Indeed, Kevin Anderson was nominated for best actor in a drama series in the annual Golden Globe Awards (when the camera was put on him, he blessed himself with two fingers). More telling was the fact that when it came to the People's Choice Award (nominees are chosen by the public), Anderson didn't make the cut. The league had something to say about this in a news release:

"Tony Danza was recognized by the public for a People's Choice Award (notwithstanding NBC's decision to cut the show) while Kevin Anderson wasn't even nominated. Yet the critics love Anderson and not Danza. Now had Danza played Father Ray, he would have kept his job though he would have lost the award (Danza's abilities are not good enough to override the show's lousy scriptwriting). On the other hand, had Anderson done a comedy show of his own, he would have lost both the award and his job. Anderson should count his blessings: were

it not for the Disney/ABC policy of preferential treatment, he'd be joining Danza on the unemployment line, minus the award. Then he'd really be suffering a loss of faith."

The beating that "Nothing" has taken has led to an internal quarrel among its backers and supporters. Originally, ABC scheduled as its second episode a show about a gay priest who has AIDS. But fearing controversy, they put the episode on ice; they have since said that they aren't sure whether it will ever be aired. This ignited a firestorm of protest.

Richard Kramer, once a co-executive producer and now a consulting producer, went crazy: "ABC's decision to bury it was based on cowardice, cruelty and co-option of the religious right's agenda." The TV reviewer for the *Los Angeles Times*, Howard Rosenberg, also went ballistic, blaming the Catholic League for what happened. Twentieth Century FOX, which produces the show, got into a huff with ABC over this. FOX president Sandy Grushow told ABC that he would ask FOX to buy unsold commercial time for the episode, but ABC wouldn't budge. To top it off, Disney chief Michael Eisner was blasted for backing away from his pledge not to cave into "interest groups" (he made the pledge just days before the controversial episode was nixed).

In response, the Catholic League offered the following comment to the press: "There's never been anything like it. The specter of the big boys at Disney, ABC and Twentieth Century FOX all scurrying around pointing fingers at each other, emptying their wallets, baring their ideological agenda—all because Catholics caught on to their game."

The two shows that aired in January were vintage "Nothing Sacred." The show of January 17 was about a black youth who is thinking about becoming a Baptist. Providing his usual counseling, Father Ray tells him "It doesn't matter what religion you belong to." Moreover, Ray comments that "The

Baptist church down the street has more spirit than any ten Catholic churches put together.” Perhaps that’s because it doesn’t welcome transvestites and drug dealers in its rest rooms.

The boy wants to convert but his mother wants him to stay (Father Ray, loyal as ever, gives the kid no resistance). In anger, the boy gets a can of black spray paint and redoes the statues in Ray’s church. True to form, Ray is unfazed (just another day in an “inner city” parish). What does excite Ray is the news that the associate pastor has restored the statues to their original color. Ray will have none of it and that is why he vandalizes the statues himself, painting them black again. And remember, this is the kind of priest that Father Andrew Greeley says is an inspiration for young men contemplating the priesthood!

In the January 24 episode, the new associate pastor, Father Martin, makes it clear to Sister Mo that he doesn’t take kindly to her disobedience (she likes to say Mass). The parish staff stands behind her, treating Father Martin with utter contempt for wanting to abide by the Church’s teachings. Father Ray even goes so far as to say to Father Martin, “Mo goes. We all go.” To which the Catholic League says, “that is why we can’t wait for her to go.” Finally, for those who didn’t see this episode, they missed the flashback scene that showed what Mo was like before she took her vows: she was shown lying in bed with her naked boyfriend.

The show fails not only because it offends, but because it is downright depressing. Most people work all week and few want to sulk in front of their TV watching dysfunctional priests and nuns. It is no wonder that little watched cable shows are sporting higher ratings than “Nothing Sacred.” But as long as it is still on the air—whatever the time and day—the Catholic League will continue to monitor it, depressing though the thought may be.