

POSTSCRIPT: “NOTHING SACRED”

The death of “Nothing Sacred” has left most Americans unfazed, but it has sent more than a few of its diehard fans into a tailspin. The post-mortem convulsions prove that the Catholic League was right all along: this was never just another TV show, it was a political statement disguised as entertainment.

True to form, those who worship at Father Ray’s altar find it impossible to admit that their side is the losing side. No amount of evidence will ever convince them that there is no audience for a highly politicized drama about a dissident priest in a dysfunctional parish. That is why they blame everyone but themselves for the collapse of “Nothing.”

Allan Johnson of the *Chicago Tribune* faults ABC for bouncing the show around “like a Ping-Pong ball.” The truth is that “Nothing’s” schedule was juggled so much because that is what its writers, producers and fans demanded: yet every time they moved it, it’s ratings got worse. Now just whose fault was that? Had they not moved the show, cries of unfair competition would have been heard, e.g., no show can compete with NBC’s “Friends.”

When all is said and done, the reason why “Nothing” failed is because it managed to be both offensive and boring at the same time, something no other show has been able to match. Interestingly, reviewers like Johnson can confess to the show’s offensive agenda and still not label it as such. Speaking of the Catholic League, Johnson says that “The New York-based group felt the series gave Catholicism a black eye in that Father Ray questions his belief in God and doesn’t have a problem championing causes that conflict with the teachings of the Catholic Church.” The real wonder is why anyone, especially Catholics, wouldn’t side with the league’s reaction.

From the *Journal Star* in Peoria, Illinois, we read that Michael Miller says “No way” to the idea that “Nothing” should be cancelled. “This is a quality show, for starters. It’s well-written, well-directed and well-acted. The pacing is just right for a show dealing with spiritual matters.” Then why was it a bomb?

Miller whines that the show “has had to face a boycott effort that was more of a smear campaign led by the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights.” He never says why other boycotts aren’t branded “smear campaigns,” just those led by the Catholic League. Miller adds that “Mainly, it has been the league’s crusading leader, William Donohue, who has spoken out against the show in one press release after another.” Question: did Donohue sign his name to a petition against Disney/ABC over 1 million times or did over 1 million persons sign their names?

It is also revealing that the show wasn’t allowed to die a natural death. Not only was it kept on long after it’s ratings dictated that it be junked, TV reviewers insisted that “Nothing” fans write to ABC and demand that it return. In addition to Johnson and Miller, Diane Werts of *Newsday* and John Levesque of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* urged readers to write to ABC, supplying names and addresses.

TV Guide took “Nothing’s” demise particularly hard. Not only had it conspicuously flagged the show virtually every week that it was on, it ran two obituaries on “Nothing.” The March 28-April 3 edition noted that some shows that start slow eventually pick up, sadly commenting that this didn’t apply to “Nothing.” In the April 4-April 10 edition, *TV Guide* offered a picture of Father Ray, complete with a review of an episode that no one will see, namely it’s Easter show. This must be a first—a major media publication prints a review of a show that will never see the light of day.

Though critics of the Catholic League don’t want to admit it,

one of the reasons why “Nothing” failed is due to the pressure that we put on corporate sponsors of the show. The 37 following companies all withdrew advertising on the show once the public let its voice known:

Isuzu, Weight Watchers, K-Mart, Benckiser, DuPont, Red Lobster, Ocean Spray, Sears, Glaxo Wellcome, Ponderosa, Dunkin’ Donuts, Scott’s Liquid Gold, Chrysler-Plymouth, Honda, Arm & Hammer, Home Depot, Borden, Alberto Culver, Montgomery Ward, Ovaltine, Dairy Queen, Mutual of Omaha, Telecom*USA, Cigna, McCormick, Pier 1, NordicTrack, John Paul Mitchell Systems, Meineke, Fantom Technologies Direct, A&M Products, Nissan, RadioShack, Chattem, International Home Foods, Levitz and Van De Kamp.

There were a lot more than 37 companies that advertised on the show and then withdrew their ad, but many didn’t want to be identified as joining the walkout, opting instead for a quiet exit. No matter, the point was not lost on the advertising community and that is why “Nothing” was forced to rely heavily on ABC promos for upcoming shows, as well as 800-number ads for John Denver CD’s. Our personal favorite was the ABC “color check” ad.

As if we needed more proof, we taped “Nothing’s” time slot on ABC the week after it was axed. What we found was the return of conventional advertising, including many companies that had withdrawn their ads from “Nothing.” The ratings for the shows that replaced “Nothing” (mostly movie reruns) all went up, making our case even stronger.

Sadly, a group that calls itself Media Images and Religious Awareness held a press conference after “Nothing” was buried. Composed of nuns and lay women, they offered a “Meditation of Thanksgiving for ‘Nothing Sacred.’” But their prayer service/breakfast then turned ugly when they started bashing the Catholic League (“right-wing fanatics,” etc.) To which, William Donohue replied in the *New York Times*: “This is

adolescent angst. The people who like the show are the Clinton generation who are stuck in the 60's, still living in the past. They're the true reactionaries of our time."

"Nothing" has been nominated for a Peabody award. John Carmody of the *Washington Post* wrote a small piece about this, stating that the show "has had a stormy life as a much-boycotted series about an unusual Catholic priest..." More unusual, we might add, were its fans. By the way, the cable station, Odyssey, which is strangely known for its religious fare, says it's interested in acquiring "Nothing." Now wasn't it P.T. Barnum who said that a sucker is born every minute?