

# **“WE ARE NOT AMUSED”**

BBC Sitcom Series Satirizes Catholic Priests...by Kenneth D. Whitehead

*In December, William Donohue was contacted by the British Broadcast Corporation (BBC) to preview the TV show, “Father Ted.” Popular in Britain, this comedy program has recently attracted the interest of several American broadcasters. However, the BBC was somewhat concerned whether the show had “cultural transferability,” meaning that it wanted to know if Americans would find it humorous to poke some fun at Irish Catholic priests (they like that sort of thing over there). That’s why Donohue was asked to preview the show in Washington.*

*Other commitments kept Donohue from attending the preview, so in his place was Kenneth Whitehead, noted Catholic author and a member of the league’s board of directors. What Whitehead witnessed was disturbing. His comments are printed below.*

Just when you thought popular television had reached bottom in the casual disrespect and downright vulgarity it regularly displays in its treatment of religious people and religious beliefs, especially Catholic ones, along comes the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to show that it is possible to descend to an even lower level—yet some audiences apparently go right on eating it all up.

One of the most popular current situation comedies broadcast by the BBC in the British Isles is not only relentlessly and deliberately vulgar in its—mostly slapstick—situations and effects. It achieves most of these effects precisely by depicting Catholic priests in Ireland as considerably less than admirable characters generally; and also by regularly making light of supposed Catholic beliefs and practices (the show is nevertheless so popular in Ireland that the Irish state-owned television network has purchased the rights to rebroadcast it).

This BBC television series is entitled *Father Ted*, and is based on the imagined lives and adventures of three priests living on an island off the west coast of Ireland. The humor of the series, such as it is, relies heavily on typical British-style "put downs" of various types of people: alcoholics, people in wheelchairs, members of the servant class, people who are not very bright, Irish people in general (who are mostly seen to fit into the previous category), and, especially, Catholic priests.

The three main characters in the show are three wacky Irish priests who live together in a rectory with a dotty housekeeper who is always trying to serve tea at the most inconvenient moments. Most of the humor and the humorous situations are based on the incongruity of Catholic priests ever doing or saying what these three Catholic priests are depicted as regularly doing and saying. The language alone typically used by them is quite vulgar and sometimes truly shocking. The situations depicted are usually quite remote from any possible priestly work or activity. No doubt all of this is quite intentional on the part of the writers, actors, producers, and sponsors; being a priest is itself considered by them humorous and worthy of a put-down, apparently.

The star of the show is a Father Ted Crilly, a flashy, opportunistic type of fellow with apparently unfulfilled yearnings and blow-dried hair. In one of the episodes of the series which I viewed, Father Ted was principally engaged in competing-impersonating Elvis no less!—in a priests' masquerade contest (in which a competing group of Irish priests arrive as female impersonators clad in low-cut ball gowns). If you can imagine any priests who would ever be involved in such dubious doings, then you probably have roughly the same idea of the Catholic Church that the scriptwriters of this show do.

Another one of the episodes I saw begins with Father Ted in a bookstore at a book-signing session attempting to get the

signature of the lady author of a volume entitled Bejewelled with Kisses. The lady author in question turns out to be both attractive and, conveniently, recently divorced; just as conveniently, she happens to be on her way to spending some time on the very island where the three priests live. Father Ted is later shown clumsily attempting to pursue her in scenes not completely saved from suggestiveness by the farce into which they quickly descend.

This latter episode is apparently one of the rare episodes in the series in which any reference at all is made to Father Ted's work as a priest; in order to keep an appointment with his visiting lady friend, Father Ted has to rush through an obligatory Mass celebrated for some nuns so fast that the vast television audience will not fail to grasp why the sworn enemies of the Church once branded the Mass as "mumbo-jumbo." Father Ted makes some of today's liturgical innovators look positively reverent by comparison.

The second of the three priests depicted on the show, Father Dougal, is quite deliberately presented as an uncomprehending simpleton, a cheerful idiot. Father Dougal is the foil for Father Ted; he can always be depended on to say the wrong thing and, on one occasion, he turns out not even to know who the pope is. Such a person could never have gotten into, much less out of, any seminary anywhere.

The third of the island-dwelling priests, Father Jack, is presented as an out-and-out alcoholic; he is consistently shown, in the episodes I viewed, either in an alcoholic stupor or single-mindedly attempting to acquire yet another bottle. In one episode he passes out after having drunk Toilet Duck cleaner.

One of the "visiting priests" in one of the episodes I viewed is shown as quite unable to control his compulsive laughter about virtually everything. In short, in the world of this sitcom, Catholic priests are a very strange breed indeed; they

are regularly shown as figures of fun, appropriately having pratfalls or otherwise in questionable, embarrassing, or compromising situations: rarely is the fun good, clean fun.

The two Irish scriptwriters who first conceived this show and continue to write the scripts for it are supposed to be ex-Catholics—"out of practice," they say. It shows. They don't even get the externals right (i.e., vestments, giving blessings, etc.). The point of having priests as the main characters in the show in the first place continues to be almost solely the incongruity of what they are then shown doing and saying. The show's scriptwriters evidently belong to today's generation of Catholics deprived of any proper catechesis; this has been the situation apparently also in Ireland. At one point Father Ted is actually made to remark: "That's the great thing about Catholicism. It's so vague nobody knows what it's all about."

On behalf of the Catholic League, I took sharp issue with the very nature of the show as such. I found it fundamentally objectionable to attempt to base humor upon such sad and unreal caricatures of Catholic priests. The show's approach and treatment of Catholic beliefs and Catholic people fundamentally belittles and mocks both—and there is otherwise no redeeming social value whatsoever. I said that I could guarantee that the Catholic League would vigorously oppose the airing of this BBC sitcom on any American network.

I added that it was a British monarch who probably said it best: "We are not amused," Queen Victoria was accustomed to say apropos of lapses of taste and morality considerably less serious than those regularly featured in this tasteless BBC series about three Irish priests out on an island off the west coast of Ireland.

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