

# WHY SOME CATHOLICS LIKE “NOTHING SACRED”

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Catholics are not a monolithic entity and it is therefore not surprising that the Catholic reaction to “Nothing Sacred” has been anything but uniform. On the one hand, we have bishops, priests, nuns, religious and lay persons who have signed our petition against Disney and are incensed about the show. On the other hand, we have bishops, priests, nuns, religious and lay persons who like the show and wouldn’t think of signing our petition. This column is dedicated to those in the latter category.

Forget about what the Catholic League says about the show. Here’s how ABC advertises “Nothing Sacred” on its website: “He just cursed out an obnoxious guy on the street, came pretty close to accepting a bribe and almost got fired. Some might say he ‘needs church.’ But then, he’s already a priest. Blessed with a God-given talent of touching people’s souls, Father Ray could use some soul saving soothing of his own.” Of course it might help if Father Ray actually believed in God (he is depicted as being uncertain), because then he would need less “soul saving soothing.”

*US*, one of those trendy magazines that wouldn’t exist without the paparazzi (you’ve seen it in your dentist’s office), gave an even better account of “Nothing Sacred” in its October edition. After chiding the Catholic League to lighten up, *US* came clean. Father Ray is described as “leftist, horny, combative and prone to telling female confessors unsure about abortion that it’s their choice.” And this is the kind of priest that some Catholics want to see on TV, and perhaps in real life as well.

A master of sarcasm, *US* tells us that “like Superman, when he puts on his cassock he performs miracles. In the clinch with God or an ex-girlfriend, Father Ray is sometimes a bit sanctimonious, but this demystifying drama about the priesthood truly pushes the TV envelope.” But not far enough to satisfy the curious appetite of some Catholics. Indeed, this is their kind of priest, a refreshing contrast to the Bing Crosby-Barry Fitzgerald types that have been the source of so much embarrassment to them over the years.

Some Catholics are exuberant over the mere fact that this show is actually addressing the theme of religion. But listen to the names of other “religion” shows on TV these days: “7<sup>th</sup>Heaven”; “Soul Man”; “Good News”; “Touched by an Angel”; “Promised Land,” etc. And for Catholics, we are awarded with a program whose message is accurately conveyed in its title, “Nothing Sacred.”

So why do some Catholics like “Nothing Sacred”? At root, their admiration stems from their uneasiness with hierarchy. What they want is a clergy who are just like the rest of us, namely, flawed human beings who just happen to be priests. They think it is a mistake for the laity to look up to priests and they deplore the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church. Intoxicated with equality, they delight in seeing priests portrayed as social workers in robes.

The nineteenth century Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, commented that “men cannot do without dogmatic beliefs” and that the most desirable of them all were “religious dogmas.” He looked to priests to provide answers to such first questions as “why am I here?” and “who put me here?” The answers to these primordial questions, he stressed, “must be clear, precise, intelligible to the crowd, and very durable.” It is not easy to see how this can be done when there are no status distinctions between priests and the laity.

Father Ray, of course, does not believe in giving answers that

are clear, precise, intelligible or durable, and that is why he can't find it within himself to counsel a young woman in the confessional against abortion. Those who like Father Ray aren't offended by this because the last thing they want to be tagged is judgmental, at least when the subject is abortion (it's okay to be judgmental about the death penalty). What they like is that Father Ray shows compassion, and that's all that counts.

In the end, the most interesting aspect of "Nothing Sacred" is not the show itself, it is the reaction to it in Catholic quarters. It says a lot about what where we're at. Where we wind up depends on us.