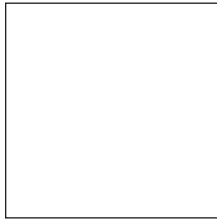


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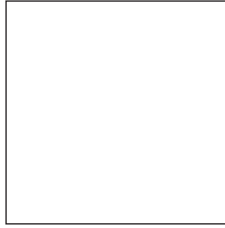
“The Gospel According to
‘Nothing Sacred’”

Bill Cain

Co-Creator, Producer, Writer
of ‘Nothing Sacred’

Public Lecture
Santa Clara University
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In 1994, through the generosity of the Bannan Institute for Jesuit Education and Christian Values, the Department of Religious Studies of Santa Clara University inaugurated the Santa Clara Lectures. This series brings to campus leading scholars in theology, offering the University community and the general public an ongoing exposure to debate on the most significant issues of our times. Santa Clara University will publish these lectures and distribute them throughout the United States and internationally.

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“Friends of God and Prophets: Community on Earth as in Heaven”

Elizabeth A. Johnson, CSJ

Sunday, Oct. 4, 1998

7:30 p.m., at the Recital Hall in the Performing Arts Center

“Clearing the Smoke”

Klaus J. Porzig, M.D.

Sunday, Feb. 7, 1999

7:30 p.m., at the Recital Hall in the Performing Arts Center

“The Common Good in a Divided Society”

David Hollenbach, S.J.

Sunday, April 18, 1999

7:30 p.m., at the Recital Hall in the Performing Arts Center

Dear readers:

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The Gospel According to Nothing Sacred

Nothing Sacred is a television series created for 20th Century Fox and Sarabande Productions and presented by ABC-TV. We made 20 episodes, 15 of which were shown. Of the five that are in the can and unshown, one was actively suppressed by the network.

the gospel truth

When I picked the title “The Gospel According to *Nothing Sacred*,” I thought I would organize the presentation around a list of propositions - rules that we on the show believed in and tried to write to. For example, there was a short list I gave the writers in one of our first story sessions, the three things that I thought made Christianity distinctive:

- Ever since the Incarnation, what’s human is divine - if only we can see it;

- When push comes to shove - mercy is justice;

- And there is a Chosen People...and it’s everybody.

But the more I prepared for tonight, the more “propositions” seemed inadequate, especially since we’re talking about a gospel. A gospel isn’t a list of truths. A gospel, first and foremost, is a story...and that’s what the series was as well. A series of stories. And stories are, thank God, very different from propositions. The title of my good friend Kevin Bradt’s book *Story As A Way Of Knowing* says it very well. Stories are ways of knowing and they operate on their own rules.

Personally, I am much more comfortable with stories than I am with any set of propositions. Propositions have a tendency to scare me with their claims to absolute truth, but I can take almost anything if it comes at me in the more forgiving form of a story.

For example, take papal infallibility...

Now, since this is for the record, I want to make it clear that I *believe* in papal infallibility. Got that? I want my belief on record. But, even though I believe in it, it makes me nervous. I mean, what if the pope makes a mistake while he’s using it? You can see my confusion...

But I can handle infallibility, believe in it, cherish it without any difficulty whatsoever if it is presented in story form. You see, the doctrine of papal infallibility is based on the story of Peter. This makes me very comfortable because it means we have a doctrine of infallibility that’s based on a man who denied Christ three times.

This I love.

Our doctrine of infallibility is based on the story of the man who got out of the boat and sank like a stone. It’s based on Peter, the only disciple Jesus called Satan and told to get behind him. Jesus offered to wash his

feet and Peter said, "No!"

This makes me very comfortable and allows me to assent to papal infallibility completely because, in the story, Peter was infallibly right. Right after he was infallibly wrong.

Stories manage to capture the contradictory, paradoxical nature of our lives in a way that propositions never can and it's the paradoxes and contradictions that make us human.

I love stories.

paradox and contradiction

Now paradoxes and contradictions were not what I was led to expect when I enter religious life. I was told that I was entering "the Life of Perfection." It turned out to be more complicated than that. I don't know if religious life has always been so complicated, but it certainly has been in the last half of the twentieth century. Take Thomas Merton, for example...

In *Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton entered a monastery in Kentucky where he expected to live and die in utter obscurity, separated from the world, faithfully living his vows, including the vow of chastity. "The Life of Perfection." Instead, he lived a life of constant involvement with the world, great fame, had (if the stories are to be believed) an intense romantic relationship with a nurse and he died in Thailand.

And, for all of these contradictions, he remains the preeminent monk of our century.

Or take Dr. Martin Luther King, the defining Christian of the century and my personal hero.

We are told that Dr. King lived a private life of great personal chaos, a sexual life of fire and brimstone, an alcohol dependency and was on the verge of a nervous collapse towards the end of his life. A life of perfection? Not quite. And yet none of this takes anything away from his being the major voice of morality of the century.

Paradoxes and contradictions.

Who knows - maybe religion has always been this complicated.

Jesus was pleased to be called Son of David. David - anointed of God, adulterer and murderer. A living, breathing contradiction. The Bible tells us that God was so angry with David that He killed his first child by Bathsheba. Even so, Jesus was still pleased to be called his son.

And maybe this is because Jesus had to deal with some powerful contradictions himself. Being a God/man could not have been easy.

But he had help in understand his personal contradictions. He had an expert teacher. His mother was a virgin.

Paradoxes. Contradictions.

And we deal with our own.

For myself, I'm a "celibate man." How can this be when being a man is defined by a sexual act?

But my personal contradiction is no odder than many of yours. How many "single parents" do we have here tonight?

And we all deal with being "Roman Catholics."

Contradictions. Paradoxes.

Over the years I have come to believe that these seeming contradictions are not, as I was taught, mistakes to be eliminated on the way to a Life of Perfection. On the contrary. Cherish your contradictions. They are the generating engine of religious experience.

naked and unashamed

The whole idea of contradictions is handled brilliantly by James Stephens in *The Crock of Gold*. In this wonderful Irish fable, Pan returns to the world. (Pan is, of course, a contradiction in himself - half-man, half-goat.) In a conversation between Pan and a virgin, the virgin Caitilin is confused and tells Pan, "I don't know what you want," and Pan responds -

"I want you to want me. I want you to forget right and wrong; to be as happy as the beasts, as careless as the flowers and the birds. To live to the depths of your nature as well as to the heights. Truly there are stars in the heights and they will be a garland for your forehead. But the depths are equal to the heights. Wondrous deep are the depths, very fertile is the lowest deep. There are stars there also, brighter than the stars on high. The name of the heights is Wisdom and the name of the depths is Love. How shall they come together and be fruitful if you do not plunge deeply and fearlessly? Wisdom is the shaggy beast that goes down. Gallantly he dives, below thought, beyond Wisdom, to rise again as high above these as he had first descended. Wisdom is righteous and clean, but Love is unclean and holy. I sing of the beast and descent: the great unclean purging itself in fire: the thought that is not born in the measure or the ice or the head, but in the feet and the hot blood and the pulse of fury. The Crown of Life is not lodged in the sun; the wise gods have buried it deeply where the thoughtful ones will not find it, nor the good: but the Gay Ones, the Adventurous Ones, the Careless Plungers, they will bring it to the wise and astonish them. All things are seen in the light - How shall we value that which is easy to see? But the precious things which are hidden, they will be more precious for our search: they will be beautiful with our sorrow: they will be noble because of our desire for them. Come away with me, Shepherd Girl, through the fields, and we will

be careless and happy, and we will leave thought to find us where it can, for that is the duty of thought, and it is more anxious to discover us than we are to be found.”

So Caitilin Ni Murrachu arose and went with him through the fields and she did not go with him because of love, nor because his words had been understood by her, but only because he was naked and unashamed.

That’s really all I want out of my personal life - to be naked and unashamed. And that’s what we were after in *Nothing Sacred*. To be able to talk about the church and its extraordinary achievement - naked and unashamed. A lot of people got very angry with us because of that, but that’s beyond my control. Naked and unashamed - that’s what we were aiming at...and sometimes we got there.

genesis of the series

A story.

When I returned from a year of prayer and study in Ireland, my Provincial asked me what I wanted to do for the next few years of my life. I told him that, after a great deal of thought and prayer, I had come to the conclusion that I wanted to be a writer. In fact, I wanted to write a TV series that would redefine a portion of American culture. *M*A*S*H* was my model. In my growing up, war was always viewed (thanks to John Wayne movies) from the point of view of the victor. *M*A*S*H* changed all that. Hawkeye and Hot Lips and Clinger and Radar taught us to see war from the point of view of the wounded. It was that kind of redefinition of American culture that I was interested in attempting.

And my Provincial laughed at me.

He laughed and then snorted, “Well, you’re aiming pretty high, aren’t you?”

I should probably write him a letter and thank him because if he hadn’t laughed at me I might still be teaching high school French. Badly.

yeah, yeah, yeah, but what about a parish?

After a number of years of writing, I got a call from David Manson, an extraordinary producer with whom I had worked with on other projects, most notably *Nightjohn*, a film about literacy in the slave community in the antebellum south. David said ABC was interested in my submitting ideas for a TV series. I came up with a couple. My favorite was set in a karate dojo where the master had disappeared and the young black belts had to keep the place going without ever letting on to the junior students that the guiding spirit was gone. I loved the idea and I still do. David said, “Yeah, yeah, yeah. What about a priest in an urban parish?” I said

OK, and we were off.

(David and I are the co-creators of the series, but I have always felt that David created the series. I just provided the material.)

When David hung up I thought, well, I must have something to say about parish life. I had been living in a parish for over ten years and contributing services. More than that, I had been a Jesuit for 400 years. Or may as well have been. When I entered the Jesuits in 1965, things hadn't changed much since the Council of Trent. In fact, just weeks before I entered, the novices were still speaking Latin. I am told that conversations were somewhat limited. "Ecce lunam."

I loved it. I loved it all. There was great beauty in being part of a long and unbroken tradition. Nowhere was this clearer than in the mass and the wonderful solemnity of the consecration. I remember the awe of being the altar server for the Master of Novices private mass. I remember his astonishing reverence as he bent over the host whispering (almost chanting) slowly, hypnotically, magically, "Hoc - est - enim - corpus - meum."

It was very powerful. Very, very beautiful.

And it worked!

Part of the wonder was that we had a guarantee that it worked. It worked *ex opere operato*. It worked by working. The worthiness of the celebrant didn't matter. What you felt didn't matter. It just worked. Which was fine by me.

Then, in the summer of 1966, a little red book appeared on all of our novitiate desks - the Documents of Vatican II, the Walter Abbott edition - and our lives were changed forever. Latin was out and we were to return to the experience of the founder of our order. Experience. We were back into the messy world of experience.

Seminaries emptied.

So many people left one community I lived in that we called it Exodus House. The sign on the door "Last one out, turn out the lights" took on a new meaning. We joked that the only reason we were staying was to divide up the property once everybody else had left.

And many, many people left...but those who stayed went on a fantastic journey....and that was the story that I thought I could tell.

a do-it-yourself priest movie

Anybody can write a priest movie. Nothing easier. The Thorn Birds, *The Bells of St. Mary's* - it's a well-worn genre - and our pilot followed all the priest-movie rules.

1. A woman must be involved to test the limits of the priest's celibacy - in this case, Gemma, a former lover, played by the wonderful Wendy

Gazelle, tempts and is tempted by our parish's pastor, Fr. Ray, played throughout the series with relentless honesty by Kevin Anderson. So, first, a woman. Then -

2. There must be an authority conflict.

3. There must be some sort of difficult confession - usually an abortion.

And that's what I wrote. A standard genre piece.

But the show also had something special.

In the middle of all the sexual confusion and hassles with the Vicar, I think the show caught a religious experience.

In Gemma's household, there is an unmourned loss - the death of the husband's first wife. The son in the family, Mark, the custodian of the family grief, attempts suicide by driving his father's car into a tree. Ray is given freedom by the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick to reach a degree of naked intimacy with the boy that transforms them both. It's not exactly liturgically correct, but it works...at least I think it does. It captures what we are all finally looking for - a religious experience, a moment in the presence of God.

a religious experience

The story of the boy was inspired by a remarkable student I knew when I was teaching sixth grade in a storefront school that Joe Towle, S.J., opened in the South Bronx.

A story.

Besides teaching grammar (Nestle's Crunch bars awarded for compound/complex sentence diagramming), I was teaching science. I know nothing about science. Most Jesuits don't. I think it has to do with Robert Bellarmine's coming down on the wrong side of the Galileo affair. (It seems like an easy call in retrospect.) No matter what you don't know, when you teach grammar school, suddenly you are an expert on everything. So, sixth grade science. We were doing an experiment with lima beans. Maybe you did it when you were in grade school. You take a lima bean, put it against the inside of a glass and stuff the center of the glass with wet paper towels. You put the glass in a cool dark place and the lima bean is supposed to grow. Well, son of a bitch if the things didn't grow. I was amazed. So I kept opening the cupboard door to look at the muscular roots that were pushing out from these dead-as-a-doornail lima beans. I did it so often that Felix, one of the kids, said with very teacherish annoyance, "Fr. Cain, if you don't stop opening that door those lima beans are never going to grow."

There was a kid in the class whom we will call Jack. Jack was diagnosed as high functioning retarded. But this kid was in no way retarded.

He was just mad. Really, really mad. If you put a book in front of him in reading class, he'd throw it across the room. If you gave him the book again, he'd throw it again. There was nothing I could do could get through to him.

So I hit him.

I was walking around the classroom teaching and I belted him a good one on the arm. He was a big kid with big strong arms. The second I did, he cocked his arm to hit me back and I said, "You can't hit me. I'm the teacher."

Day after day, I'd hit him. Finally, one day he hit me back. Hard. Everybody waited to see what would happen, but I just kept teaching. The next day I hit him again, he hit me back and then I hit him - harder - and the class went on. This went on for a few days and finally one day we didn't stop. We just kept belting each other. Then Felix, again very adult, said, "Fr. Cain. You must stop this. You are behaving like a child!" I said, "You're perfectly right, Felix. Take over the class." And he did. I sat down next to Mark and we kept hitting one another till Felix threw us both out of the class. And we stepped outside and hit each other until we were laughing pretty hard.

Joyous, released laughter. It was wonderful. Open. Free.

And dangerous.

Because I had gotten behind Jack's defenses, but, once there, I had no idea whether I could actually teach him anything.

Math was the hardest for him. And for me too. We did flash cards for the 8 times table till we were both blue in the face, but he just couldn't get it. Finally, out of frustration I said, "Look, let's try it a different way, OK?" And instead of flip cards going in order, I laid out the 8 times table randomly. I showed him where all the 8's were. Then all the 5's. And the 6's. And so on. He looked at it, said OK, walked to the board and wrote out the 8 times table perfectly.

I was astonished and so was he.

I erased the board and he wrote it out again. Perfection.

I called the class to take a look and told Jack to do it again. He did, but this time with mistakes. I was disappointed and told the class to go back to what they were doing. When Jack asked me why I was erasing the board and I said because there were mistakes. When he insisted that it had been perfect, I said, "Don't lie, Jack. There were 9's where there should have been 8's" and he said, "But that's how I make my 8's." He showed me how he made his 8's and he was perfectly right. So I said to the class again, "Look at this," and Jack wrote the 8 times table on the board effortlessly and perfectly.

Miracle.

There was a stunned silence in the room.

Nobody knew what to say.

Then Felix announced, "Someone must buy him a Nestle's Crunch!"

And everyone laughed.

The bell rang. Everyone left except for Jack and me. We sat there looking at each other. Silence. There was tremendous affection between us. Tremendous love. Tremendous pride.

Then Jack said, "You're looking at me funny."

And I said, "No, I'm not." And he said, "You are. You're looking at me funny."

And I asked, "How do you mean - funny?"

There was a pause and then he said, "You're looking at me like somebody who can learn."

Silence.

And I said, "Of course, you're somebody who can learn. Of course you are."

He rose and we embraced. A powerful, full, body-to-body embrace. He went on into his next class and I knelt down right where I was for two reasons. First, I needed to ask forgiveness for ever having looked at this kid like somebody who couldn't learn when even a God damn lima bean wants to reach for the sun. And second, because this was holy ground.

Two people had looked at one another and, for a very brief moment, had seen each other as God sees us. We were no longer young and old, no longer teacher and student, or smart and not. Just two people, looking at each other with all the love and care and warmth that God has for us...and God was there. In us. Around us. God's undeniable presence. In its everyday way, that moment was what mystics hope for. Take your shoes off; you're standing on holy ground. And, like all religious experiences, it couldn't be more simple, more human...or more fragile. As Gerard Manley Hopkins says, "I greet him the days that I meet him and bless when I understand." This was one of those days.

The priest and the boy in the pilot fight as did Jack and I, but the naked-and-unashamed moment between comes, not in a classroom, but in a sacrament. When the boy attempts suicide, Ray anoints him and says -

RAY

(with urgency)

Here smell his, Mark. Smell this. Smells good, doesn't it? It's oil, Mark. The monks of the Sholin Temple use this. It heals, Mark.

(applying oil)

Mark, I know you don't believe in God but I'm going to

loan you mine for a while. I'm going to need him back though, OK?

(driving forward, anointing)

God, bless and protect my friend Mark. Bless his mind, his sight, his hearing, his hands. He doesn't believe when people die they leave a hole in the world, but they do, Mark, they do. Just like your mother's death left a hole in the world. And do you know where that hole is?

(anointing the heart)

It's right here, Mark. Right here in your heart.

And a healing takes place, a healing that the boy then passes on to his father in a second anointing.

A religious experience. An experience of Christ alive. And we captured it. And we set about trying to do that in every episode. Sometimes we succeeded, sometimes we failed, but that was always our goal.

an experience of Christ

When we have a religious experience, we tend to call it an experience of Christ. This can be confusing because our religious experiences are not always Christ-like. In fact, our experience rarely duplicates Christ's experience. Happily, we aren't imitations of Christ. I'm not fond of *The Imitation of Christ* either as a book or an idea. It doesn't seem to me that Christ wanted to be an imitation of anyone. Jesus was no more trying to be an imitation of Moses than Moses was trying to be an imitation of Abraham. Why then should we think that God expects us to become imitations of Christ? No. Abraham, Moses and Jesus were all originals and their religious experience was firmly rooted in the experience of becoming themselves. In so becoming, each released an energy into the world that reflected a God who chose to call himself "I Am Who Am." As we become deeply who God calls us to be, we become Christ-like, even if, like many of the saints, we aren't superficially much like Christ at all.

Take Francis of Assisi. He's the Mirror of Christ, but in some ways, he's Jesus' exact opposite. There he is - Francis, arms open, praying passionately for his body to be ripped open by the exact same wounds that Christ is praying equally passionately to be spared. Still, Francis became a saint by becoming who he was and he transformed the world by bringing peace...just as Joan became a saint by putting on armor and waging war. As opposite Francis as could be, yet Joan became St. Joan by becoming the Joan God called her to be, Christ-like in her own way.

And, it should be noted, no matter who you are, if you do somehow manage to become yourself, sooner or later you're bound to catch hell for it.

hiv priest

After the pilot, our first episode was based on the life of a fellow Jesuit who in the series we called Jesse. Jesse and I were from different provinces, but we got to know one another when we studied philosophy and, later, theology together. He was a very, very good guy. Very holy. Very prayerful. And very funny. His room was as ascetic as any monk's room. Extremely austere. A bed on a wood frame. A peg from which hung a beautiful monk's robe. A priedieu. Books. A bit of stained glass. An antique breviary. Very beautiful. Very impressive. Even intimidating. When I expressed my admiration for his simplicity of life, Jesse, all self-knowledge and irony, said, "Yes, there's very little here - but every single piece cost a fortune."

He was a wonderful community mate, a holy man, and he became an excellent theologian and teacher. And then he went away and died by himself. Of AIDS.

It was very early in the crisis and Jesse, ashamed and unable to face the community, isolated himself completely.

In our first episode, I wanted to find a way to pay tribute to Jesse, to tell him he was - and always would be - welcome among us. We set out to create a story that would heal.

With the network's approval, Richard Kramer and I wrote a story and Richard wrote the screenplay for an episode called HIV Priest. At the core of the episode is Fr. Ray's long-standing friendship with young, funny, austere Fr. Jesse. Ray and Jesse, along with five other priests, make up the Priests' Senate, which is the name of a floating poker game that gets together weekly in one of the priests' rectories. At the end of each game, the group's elder statesman, a monsignor called Senior, proposes the same toast:

SENIOR

Gentlemen, a toast!

(raising his glass)

To the last six celibate heterosexual priests in the Western World....

All - all but Jesse - drink.

A week later, when it's Ray's turn to host the game and he calls Jesse to enlist his aid with food, he learns that Jesse has disappeared. Though the others at the parish have been covering for him effectively, they are beginning to be frightened. Ray sets out to look for Jesse, finds him, discovers that Jesse's HIV status has become full blown AIDS, and that Jesse, unable to face his contradictions and broken vows, simply wants to vanish. It becomes Ray's quest - over a day-long series of tempestuous, chal-

lenging encounters - to bring Jesse back to the table - the Eucharistic table and the poker table.

When the Priests' Senate convenes that night, Jesse, much to Ray's disappointment, is absent. At the end of the game, as Senior proposes his toast to the last six heterosexual priests in the Western World, Jesse arrives and confronts Senior with his bigotry and the rest of the priests with the truth of his life.

JESSE

(taking his place at the table)

As most of you know, I am gay. As many of you know, I am HIV positive. And, as now all of you know, I have AIDS.

With that, Jesse tosses in his chip and awaits the Monsignor's response.

Silence.

The Monsignor considers the situation and says:

SENIOR

Well, I'm a 67 year old heterosexual virgin. I have prostate cancer and the doctors want to put a radioactive thingie in my penis and I won't let them.

And, after a moment of thought, he tosses in his chip.

One by one, the priests go around the table. Each priest tosses in his chip, and with each chip, each makes a simple confession to match Jesse's and Senior's. "What can I say? One day at a time." "I'm seeing a shrink. Things are getting better." Etc. And, in common acceptance of a common fragility, a kind of communion is achieved...and Jesse is welcomed back to the poker table.

After the priests have gone, Ray and Jesse are left by themselves to clean up. Jesse confesses to Ray that he is scared. Ray says simply, "That's how this whole thing started."...

JESSE

What? With a poker game?

RAY

(after brief pause)

No. With a man in his early 30's. Knowing he was going to die. Scared. And he took bread and broke it...

(breaking bread)

...and shared it with his friends and said...

JESSE

(with feeling)

Remember me...

They eat the bread and sit silently, brothers, holding hands.

Hoc - est - enim - corpus - meum.

Communion. Not ex opere operato, not the technical sacrament, but, once again, this time in honor of Jesse, we managed to capture a religious experience. At least it feels that way to me. An experience of Christ. An experience of healing with the message that there is room for everyone at the table.

Which, as it turned out, wasn't true.

catching hell

HIV Priest, which was to be our first episode after the pilot, never got on the air.

ABC, which had approved the writing and filming of the episode, began to have serious second thoughts about showing it. A boycott against us, organized by a religious wrecking crew who condemned Nothing Sacred as anti-Catholic before a single episode was shown, was making corporate sponsors nervous. So we were told that, for our own good, HIV Priest would be postponed. The ABC executives assured us that, thought the episode would not be shown first, it would be shown as one of the first six episodes. But as the first 6 became the first 8, and then the first 12, it became clear that the show was being suppressed and would not be shown at all. This postponement, besides being discouraging artistically and destructive of trust, had some very practical implications. With HIV Priest (already written and being filmed) dropped from the schedule, suddenly we had no first episode. Where there should have been a new four act script, sixty pages of writing, there was not a word. Nothing.

Panic.

an aside about television writing

If you think of writing as an art, do not write for television. Or only write pilots. With a pilot you have two months to write, a month to rewrite, and 16 days to film. Once the series actually starts, you have 8 days to write each episode while filming another, editing still another, and casting and designing yet a fourth. If you think of writing as art, this relentless assembly line approach isn't for you.

Now, if you're interested in writing as a sport - complete with cut-throat competition, time limits, and weekly rankings - you might want to give it a try.

a community of faith

So - no first episode.

As a writer/producer, I had to go to our pre-production meeting and tell a group of 30 professionals that the script for the next episode - the document on which all budgets are based, locations scouted, costumes prepared, etc. - did not exist. I felt extremely naked and entirely ashamed. "Look," I said, "I don't have a script, but I do have an idea. On a Sunday afternoon, the church runs a soup kitchen in the basement hall. That night there is to be a wedding reception in the same hall. By accident, the wedding banquet is served to the homeless and the staff has to improvise a wedding reception. At the very end, the bride and groom spend their wedding night in bed reading the Bible as erotica. But that's all I have."

There was silence as everybody took the situation in.

I felt like a complete failure.

Then the extras casting person asked, "How many come to the soup kitchen?" And I said, "Oh, two to three hundred." The head of the props department asked, "What do you want them to eat?" And the soup kitchen meal and the banquet were both described. Then the designer asked, "Would you like satin sheets?" And I said, "That's the best offer I have had in quite some time and, yes, I would."

And we were off.

Script or no script, the production team was prepared to tell our story, even if we had to make it up on the spot. And even when, on some episodes, we came perilously close to being in exactly that situation, Cyrus Yavneh, our line producer, stuck to his refrain - "Not a problem." It was the most supportive group of people I have ever worked with in my life and was one of the truly great experiences of community I have ever had. I miss them. They paralleled in faith, devotion, and humor the residents of our mythical parish of St. Thomas.

cast of characters

The parish in *Nothing Sacred* was originally named after St. Januarius, the Roman martyr whose still-preserved coagulated blood is said to liquify and boil one day every year. I thought it was a good image for the occasional rushes of life found in the post-Vatican II church, but the ABC legal department ruled it out since there is a St. Januarius parish in the United States. So, the parish became St. Thomas the Doubter, which also seemed appropriate since all of its residents had their share of doubt mixed in with their faith. No character epitomized this more than Sidney Walters, the parish accountant, played by the wonderful Bruce Altman.

sidney walters

I have to thank the network for Sidney. They wanted someone on the staff who was a non-believer and we came up with Sidney, an atheist who likes religion - which describes most Jesuits I know. Jewish by background, a red diaper baby raised by socialist parents, he is always reaching for a God he doesn't believe exists.

The Easter episode, our last, brought together many elements we had been struggling with since the start of the series and it has Sidney at his best, at his most contradictory, at his most faithful to his contradictions. In it, the church burns down and Sidney runs through the fire to get the Blessed Sacrament out of the tabernacle because he has been asked to do so by Dolly, an old woman who will be baptized at the Holy Saturday vigil. Afterwards, outside the church, holding the ciborium, Sidney is furious with himself and his inexplicable conduct.

SIDNEY

(wild, with ciborium)

Will somebody tell me what I was doing running through fire to save some bread!?!?

DOLLY

(taking ciborium)

It's not just bread and you're a good man, Mr. Walters.

SIDNEY

I'm a crazy man and I've got to quit this job before I get myself killed!

But he doesn't quit - ever. He keeps reaching into the darkness and by so doing, he becomes himself as Abraham did. And Moses. And Christ. With all his contradictions, he has a constant question: "Is there a place for me in this world?" And, more particularly, "Is there a place for me here, in this church?"

leo

Leo is the pastor emeritus of St. Thomas and was played by the magnificent Brad Sullivan. Leo represents the absolute best of Catholic tradition. He's loosely based on a Jesuit brother, a great and very wise man in his 80's. All of Leo's spirit and greatness of heart - as well as some of his best lines - come directly from Brother Dan.

Some Dan stories.

Like Leo, Dan always attended the earliest mass of the day and, in all the years I said that mass, he never once complimented my preaching. And I'm a good preacher! I pride myself on it. But never a word from

Dan. So one day I decided to confront him and I said, "OK, Dan, just admit it. You don't like my preaching." Dan paused and then said, "It's not your preaching I don't like...It's preaching I don't like."

One day when I had laryngitis and had to skip the homily altogether, he came up to me and said, "That was your best homily yet."

Dan is reputed to have worked miracles. There was a woman in the parish whom the doctors said could not have children. Dan went to Mejegory abd prayed for her. She had a child shortly thereafter. If anybody could do it, it's Dan.

Unlike Dan, Leo is an alcoholic, a member of AA - sober 13 years. And he, better than any of the others, knows how to reconcile painful opposites - or at least tolerate their opposition. Leo, Ray's mentor, knows that we are mysteries to ourselves and acknowledges our weaknesses readily. He embraces them. When Ray, trying to work from his strength, maintains that only the strong survive, Leo disagrees passionately.

LEO

Darwin was an idiot. Evolution doesn't work. Mankind proves it. Hell, your family proves it. It's the weak that hold the key.

This understanding makes Leo profoundly compassionate. He understands our wounded nature. In one of the episodes we did about Ray's supremely dysfunctional family, Leo preaches for the first time in six years...

LEO

(to all, from pulpit)

I stopped preaching when I lost my faith in the resurrection. It was the wounds that did it, I suppose. You see, when God brought his son back from the dead, he left five gaping wounds in his body. Seemed cruel to me. If he was going to bring his son back to life, why didn't he heal his wounds? I would have.

(more and more to Ray)

St. Thomas, after whom our church is named, had his doubts about the resurrection too. But Jesus came to him and said, "Come here, Thomas, give me your hand. I want you to put your hand into my wounds feel that I am alive.

(personally, to Ray)

That's what wounds are for - places to enter each others lives. They are honorable things even though we spend most of our time trying to hide them...

But now that Leo is getting old and is starting to fail, he has his own questions. "Is there a place for me in the world? Is there a place for me here?"

(Brother Dan has his own troubles with aging, but, as always he handles the situation with dignity and humor. Once when we were talking and he was struggling to come up with a name, he said, "I'm losing my memory....thank God.")

sister maureen - mo

In many ways, Mo - Sister Maureen Brody - is the heart of the show. It took us a few tries to figure out Mo. In the pilot I made her a slightly shrill mouthpiece for inclusive language in the liturgy. In the second episode she became something of a goody-goody. It wasn't until a crucial moment in the soup kitchen/wedding reception episode that we really found out who she was. You see, it was Mo who cheerfully served the wedding banquet to the homeless and Mo who discovers the mistake as she's finishing serving the last pieces of cake -

MO

(pleasantly, to Sidney)

Oh, look, isn't this cute. There's a little bride and a little groom at the bottom of the box. This must have been from a wedding....A WEDDING!....OH MY GOD, SIDNEY. GET BACK THE CAKE. GET BACK THE CAKE.

SIDNEY

OK, ladies and gentlemen, this is a cake recall...

Try as he might, all Sidney can get back is a small square of cake. This daunts Mo not at all. What are they going to do for a wedding cake?

MO

Frost the boxes!

RACHEL

What?

MO

(on a roll)

Frost the boxes. We'll take the little bit of cake that we have, put it on the top, put the little bride and groom on top of that. We'll serve the wedding cake to the bride and groom and for the rest of the guests we'll take the twinkies that we have in the storeroom, put them in casserole pans, cover them with chocolate pudding and call it trifle.

RACHEL

What's trifle?

MO

Exactly!

And it works.

And suddenly we knew who Mo was. She's the one who will frost the boxes. In fact, Mo will do anything necessary to heal the cracks in a broken world. From the moment Mo said, "Frost the boxes," we knew that Mo would always make it better, no matter the cost to herself, and sometimes the cost is considerable since she has some of the hardest opposites to reconcile. For her the question of "Do I belong? Do I belong here?" are particularly intense. You see, Mo feels called to be a priest in a church that tells her that her body makes her ineligible for what her soul is calling her to. Many, many times this makes her feel like walking out the door and never coming back. But she holds on. She holds on to hope.

MO

(with painful joy)

I love the Virgin Birth. I only get confused when I mistake it for a biology lesson. It means everything to me. It means..well...it means what God said to Sarah after she laughed at him for telling her that she would have a child when she was old. It means, is anything...is anything too wonderful for God?

And sometimes it seems right that she hold on - that nothing is impossible for God - as it does on Christmas Eve night, when she gets to preside at the midnight service. She has to. All the priests are in jail!

In the middle of filming the Christmas service, the actress who played Mo - Anne Dowd, who, like her character, was frequently the heart of the show - came down the aisle to me and said, electrified by doing the service, "This is it, isn't it? This is the difference between being a priest and a nun." And she went back and played the hell out of the scene and became a fierce defender of Mo's priesthood from that point on.

Is there a place for me here? Do I belong here?

In the series, the answer was a resounding yes.

In reality, however, the situation was very different. During the filming of the series, one of the two nuns on whom Mo was based got fired - in my opinion extremely unjustly - by the pastor. In spite of an organized protest by the community that eventually caused the pastor to be removed, the sister was never rehired.

Is there a place for Mo? In our world? In our church?

I wonder.

rachel and eric

Rachel and Eric were the two youngest members of the staff and the cast.

Eric, played brilliantly by Scott Campbell, is a newly ordained priest and his main fault is that he has no faults. He does things right and expects other people to do the same. At St. Thomas, where the pastor is the passionate, undisciplined, play-it-as-it-lays Fr. Ray, this is an unreasonable expectation. Ray is Eric's hair shirt and visa versa. Yet, in his own way, Eric is as passionate as Ray. He is above all passionate about his priesthood and Ray's laissez-faire attitude offends him. In fact, in the Christmas episode, it drives him over the edge. When Ray cancels midnight mass, using the church to protect two Salvadoran catechists from the INS, Eric goes ballistic...

ERIC

(outraged)

What kind of church doesn't have midnight mass, Ray? If this is what priesthood is, I quit!

...and he throws his collar down and walks away.

But, that night, when he hears the story of the El Mazote massacre from the female catechist, his good heart does a 180 and he's willing to do anything to defend the catechists' right to stay in the church - including get in a fist fight with a cop, which he does, which gets all of the priests thrown into jail, leaving Mo to do the service. There, in jail, Eric, a notoriously bad preacher, gets to give the Christmas homily. As Leo says, it's a perfect audience for Eric's preaching - captive.

Rachel was never supposed to be a regular on the show. The 18 year old receptionist was meant to be a bit part, but two things happened. The first was that when I was writing the pilot, there was this woman who kept going to confession about an abortion she was going to have. I had no idea who she was. Then, two days before the script was due, it suddenly occurred to me that the woman going to confession was actually Rachel, the church receptionist. It took two days of non-stop writing to get it to work, but suddenly, Rachel was a major player, at least for the pilot. The second thing was the audition of an actress named Tamara Mello. She walked into the audition and blew us away. And Rachel became a regular on the show.

Rachel's contradiction was clear. What is a woman who had an abortion doing working at a Catholic church?

ABC's department of Standard and Practices submitted each of our scripts to the media office of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles for vetting. We didn't follow all the suggestions made in their frequently voluminous

notes, but they were always helpful in sharpening our thinking. When the script about Rachel's abortion (written by a Jewish feminist and a Jesuit priest amid many shouting matches) was submitted, it came back with no notes. We were astonished. We knew we had been careful, but we didn't think we had been that careful. Then, we noticed that there was one line on the paper. It said that though there were no notes on the episode, we should realize that from this point forward Rachel was an excommunicate.

Chilling.

So Rachel's question of do I belong is clear, compelling and very painful.

ray

Then there is Fr. Ray, played by the complex, compelling, powerful Kevin Anderson.

What can I say about Ray? He's randy. Unkempt. Has very poor impulse control. He has a tendency to get angry in the confessional. He's riddled with doubt. (In fact, my current provincial told me he couldn't believe that anyone who deals with that much doubt could be a priest. I just let that one go by.) Ray believes deeply that the church Christ founded is meant to be widely inclusive. Sidney, Mo, Leo, Rachel, Eric all belong, all have a place at St. Thomas' as long as he's pastor. And how long will that be? He doesn't know. There's a lot Ray doesn't know. Much of the time, he's a walking question.

The one thing Ray knows for sure is that he is called. Just as Samuel was.

When Samuel was a young apprentice to Eli, he slept in the next room to Eli. Late one night, he wakes Eli and says, "What do you want?" And Eli says, "I don't want anything." And Samuel says, "Then why did you call me?" Eli answers, "I didn't call you. Go back to bed." Which he does. A little later he's back tugging at Eli's bed clothes and saying, "What do you want?" And Eli says, "I DIDN'T call you. GO - BACK - TO - BED." And he does. When Samuel wakes Eli a third time and says, "Why did you call me?" Eli finally understands. And he says, "Go back to bed, Samuel, and if you are called, stay in your room say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant listens."

That is Ray's experience.

He is called. He doesn't always want the call, especially when he's called to pray in the middle of the night, absurdly kneeling in his underwear looking out at the city from his bedroom window. But he always answers, "Speak, Lord, for your servant listens." Even to God's silence,

Ray listens.

Ray's constant question is how deep does the call go? Is the call one call among many, or THE call of his life. Can he base his life on this fragile tentative thing called faith? How deep is his experience of Christ?

the last episode

Our last episode was written under conditions similar to the soup kitchen episode. When, out of the blue, we received the announcement that ABC was canceling us, we rushed a final episode into production. We wanted to end with a show that summed up all that had come before. We wanted to have Ray make some peace with his doubts, to have Mo reach to the heart of her mystery, to have Rachel's suffering become wisdom, to have Eric preach brilliantly...and, as always, we had exactly no time in which to get it all down on paper. So the script for our Easter episode went into overdrive. The script was co-written by Cyrus Yavneh and me, but everybody had a hand in. Michael Breault, S.J., a producer, wrote scenes (uncredited) for 12 hours a day and David Manson and Greer Shepherd were relentless with their support, ideas and demands.

We had learned a great deal from the previous episodes and, above all, we had developed a fairly clear idea of who God was for us. God had become what is most precious in our lives...and what's most frequently thrown away.

easter

From the start of the series, I knew that, by the end, I wanted to get St. Thomas' back to the simplest, earliest form of church - just a few people standing on the side of the road with Jesus. And that's what our Easter episode did. The church burns down. Eric burns it down.

Since he's a legendarily bad preacher, instead of preaching, Eric is put in charge of the Easter fire. Though he's frustrated being the liturgical hibachi boy, he's a perfectionist and determined to make the best fire possible. In the course of experimenting to create the ultimate Easter fire, Eric burns down the church.

A final story.

Act One. Ray is conducting a funeral with the entire staff in attendance. When the casket is opened, he discovers that in addition to being the celebrant, he's also the cadaver. Cut to Ray's bedroom where Ray wakes up screaming - one of a series of Easter-inspired nightmares Ray will have in the episode. Ray cannot get the resurrection to penetrate to

the heart of his imagination. The furthest he can get is the Empty Tomb. This making it hard for Ray to prepare the adult catechumens - including an old woman named Dolly - for baptism at the Easter vigil.

Meanwhile, the diocese - in the person of Fr. Martin, Ray's co-pastor - is trying to shut St. Thomas' down for good based on financial considerations. No wonder Ray's having nightmares.

When Sidney tries to get Ray to see a shrink, Ray, thinking himself the helper rather than the helped, won't go.

SIDNEY

Suit yourself, but I wouldn't let my pride get in the way of a good night's sleep.

When Ray turns to Maureen for help, Mo isn't surprised that Ray is having troubles with Easter.

MO

Men have always had trouble with Easter. The apostles wouldn't believe the women. In fact, if it weren't for a former hooker, we still might not know that Christ rose from the dead.

Mo doesn't know if she can help with Easter this year. After performing the midnight service at Christmas, she doesn't know if she can be satisfied just doing the set up work for the services anymore. Ray in desperation offers her the Exultet to sing on Holy Saturday night - the solemn proclamation of the resurrection.

MO

(intrigued)

I have always wanted to sing on Holy Saturday night.

Mo goes to pray about that and, in the quiet of the church, hears mysterious singing - the voice of a young girl - singing an old Marian hymn - "Oh Mary we crown thee with blossoms today." Mo, charmed, joins in the singing and goes to find the singer, but she can find no one. A mystery. Someone is hiding in the church. Who?

After further nightmares, Ray finally goes to see a psychiatrist and confesses to feeling lost.

SHRINK

Well, that's good, isn't it? From what I understand, Easter means when all is lost, there's still something to be found.

RAY

(despairing)

Well, I can't find it.

SHRINK

Well, maybe that's because all isn't lost yet.

But soon all is lost. When Ray returns from the shrink, he finds that the church is on fire. End of Act 1.

Act Two. The staff fights bravely to save St. Thomas'. Most remarkable is Mo. Driven by the memory of the voice that she heard earlier in the day, she runs into the church shouting, "Where are you? Is anybody there?" Against their better judgement, Rachel and Justine, the Director of Religious Education, follow and three women shout into the flames. "Where are you? Is anybody there?" Even when the firemen arrive and assure Mo there is no one in the building, she is unwilling to leave. She has found a bloody cloth. She is sure there is some one in the church - someone who is hurt, bleeding.

When the women are forced out of the church, they join the rest of the staff and watch the church burn. Sidney (wild with himself because, at the old woman - Dolly's - insistence, he ran into the fire to save the Blessed Sacrament) is a wreck, but Eric is suicidal.

ERIC

Some people have bad first years as a priest. They give a bad homily. Do confessions badly. Me, I burn down the church!!!

And the church is well and truly burned.

In the magnificent, smoldering ruins of St. Thomas', the staff grieves and wonders about the future of the parish. There are a few dim signs of hope. Rachel discovers a dolphin mosaic on the floor she has never noticed before. Justine explains that the dolphin was an ancient symbol of Christ and his resurrection. But resurrection for the parish seems unlikely as Martin announces that the bishop thinks that the fire is a final sign that the parish should be closed for good. Ray, knee-jerk defiant as always, declares that Easter will be held in the church and is supported by the staff - especially by Justine who points out to Martin that, in the Bible, for Elijah at least, God wasn't in the fire, nor was he in the earthquake. He was in the small still voice and that hadn't been heard yet.

As Ray vows that Easter will be in the church, Mo wonders - "Is it even possible?"

Act Three. Eric, in despair, has taken to drinking bad altar wine. Feeling completely responsible for the destruction of the church, he wonders if he can even ever go back into the building. He certainly doesn't know how he could ever face the staff again, especially Leo whose life work - the parish - he has just destroyed.

RACHEL

(ironic, consoling)

You know with Leo, it's possible - just possible - that he might not even notice.

Eric, feeling patronized, blows up. He has no experience with failure. He was never the kid who got drunk and wrapped the car around the tree. He does things right and Rachel can't possibly know how he feels. Rachel, who knows a thing or two about screwing up, rips into his self-pity.

RACHEL

(laser-like)

OK, kill yourself. So, you screwed up. You screwed up big time. Well, welcome to the human race, Eric. Maybe now you'll have something more to tell us than the right way to do everything cause that never helped anybody anyway.

(with real affection)

And if it took burning down the church to teach you that, then so be it. I think you're worth it....

(a challenge)

...and, by the way, Ray wants you to preach on Easter.

ERIC

(astonished)

I can't...I can't.

Meanwhile, Ray visits the old woman Dolly, who, hospitalized for smoke inhalation, wants to get out of the hospital where she can't get any rest. Every time she closes her eyes, somebody whispers in her ear that it's OK. She can let go and go to the light.

DOLLY

Well, I don't want to go to the light. I want to be baptized at St. Thomas on Holy Saturday night!

When Ray asks her why baptism means so much to her, Dolly says she wants some of the joy that the staff has. Ray says it doesn't feel like joy. It feels like hard work and confusion and loneliness.

DOLLY

(with a depth of understanding)

Joy isn't happiness. It's knowing that you mean something. And that's what you all have. And that's what I want.

RAY

That's a lot to ask from a little bit of water.

DOLLY

I'm not asking it from water. I'm asking it from God.
And he won't fail me.

Later, Mo and Ray confront reality. As they sit in the burned out church, they realize that Easter cannot be celebrated at St. Thomas. It's over. The parish is over. Maybe priesthood is over for Ray and sisterhood for Mo. She'd like it to be. It keeps her doing insane things, like running into a burning empty church, insisting there is someone in there. Ray asks why she did that, Mo responds -

MO

I heard a song.
(after brief pause)
And I found a cloth.
(confident)
There was somebody here...
(losing faith)
...or maybe not...
(faith gone)

Maybe there never was anybody here at all.

And they say good-bye to one another. It was a good ride, but it's over. Even the one religious thing that Mo wanted to save from the ruins has been destroyed. The statue of Peter's wife, Pietra, commissioned earlier in the series and modelled on Mo, is nothing now but a wire frame and some melted clay. Ray offers to throw it away for her. Why not? It's over. St. Thomas is a thing of the past. All is finally lost.

As Ray tosses the statue into the dumpster...

RAY

Ciao, Pietra...

...he hears a noise. He tries to walk away but finds he cannot. He hears the noise again. And again. And inexplicably, he jumps into the dumpster and starts tearing through the garbage screaming for Mo. When she arrives she wonders if Ray has lost his mind, until Ray uncovers the source of the sound from under all the garbage - a struggling new-born child wrapped in bloody clothes. End of Act Three.

Act Four. In the hospital, the child is examined and found to be thriving. Mo and Ray, so recently hopeless, are now filled with hope - which they somewhat resent.

MO

Ray, do you think God is making fun of us?

RAY
(laughing)

Constantly...

(exhausted)

Well, the small still voice has finally spoken.

MO

(equally)

And what did it say?

RAY

It said we've got a lot of work to do.

As Ray leaves to attack the impossible task of getting the church ready for Easter, Mo remains behind to ask about the health of the child and learns, that though the child is fine, the child's mother is in trouble. She is carrying a disease which, untreated, could permanently damage her reproductive system though, as the nurse says, for the mother of this child, that might not be such a bad thing. When Mo objects that the nurse can't possibly know the circumstances of this child's birth, the nurse interrupts...

NURSE

Sister, you have to believe that everyone is redeemable. I don't.

Mo decides to look for the mother with the only tool that she has - the song that she heard in the church. So, Mo does get to sing on Holy Saturday night, but not the Exultet in church. She walks through the darkened streets of city singing "O Mary, we crown thee with blossoms today...."

Meanwhile, the congregation arrives at St. Thomas' to celebrate in the empty tomb of a church. As Ray sings the Exultet proclaiming, "O happy fault. O necessary sin of Adam," Mo walks the streets steadfastly singing her hymn...until she hears an answering song and finds a young woman, half-mad and crying in a dark corner of an alley. They sing together until the girl - the mother of the child - finally speaks. She weeps out an apology - "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." When Mo asks for what, the girl says -

GIRL

(utterly lost)

I couldn't think what to do. I couldn't think. So I killed my baby. And then God burned down the church to punish me.

And Mo at her very best, making sense of everything, all evil, all terror, embracing what destroys in the greatness of her heart, a real priest if not a cultic one, reaches for the girl with passion and draws her back from the brink of madness to sanity and to God...

MO

(commanding)

Listen to me. Listen to me. Your baby is alive. Your baby is alive, darling.

(from the bone)

And don't you cry about that fire. Don't you cry about that fire. If it hadn't been for that fire we might never have found your baby. Thank God - thank God for the fire...

And Mo draws the girl into her strong, warm embrace.

Meanwhile, Eric, humbled by the burnt church around him, reaches greatness. In the candlelight that illuminates the church, he struggles to see his notes for his long, dull, prepared homily.

RACHEL

(interrupting)

Forget your notes, Eric. Just speak to us from your heart. Eric hesitates.

RAY

(warmly)

Just talk to us, Eric.

And he does. Abandoning his prepared text, Eric preaches well for the first time and sums up everything that Nothing Sacred understood about life.

ERIC

(costly truth)

It's hard being alive. Having enough faith to go on living. In fact, I think the happiest Christ ever was when he was dead...

(after shocked response)

You have to remember the last thing that Christ saw when he was alive was a soldier running at him with a spear and he was completely unable to defend himself. So being dead must have been quite a relief.

(from within Christ)

Imagine the shock he must have felt when he heard the Father calling him to come back to life.

(with deepening conviction)

Everything in him must have said, "NO! No. I won't. I won't come back. Pick somebody else!"

(quietly)

But the Father wouldn't pick someone else. He put his lips against his son's ear and said...

(from Eric's very good heart)

“Wake up. You have to wake up. You have to come back.
I’m not done loving you yet.

(after brief pause)

I’m not done loving you yet...”

And Rachel embraces Eric.

Easter, born in fire, concludes in water and a cascade of laughter, as Ray baptizes Dolly who demands more and more and more water shouting into the sky -

DOLLY

Thank you! Oh, thank you!

And that night Ray sleeps...and dreams of dolphins.

Nothing Sacred.

Thank you.





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