

# TV Series NOTHING SACRED on You Tube

During its 1997-98 brief run on ABC this series about the hardworking staff of St. Thomas Catholic Church, located in the inner city of a large but undesignated city, was the best program on TV. No program (or movie for that matter) had shown both the daily activities of a parish connecting with its neighborhood and the sometimes-disturbing complexities of faith.

The first episode "Proofs for the Existence of God" provided enough food for thought to keep the minds of viewers busy until the next episode. From its very beginning when the credits are rolling we know that this is a special show. Quebec resident Renard Roux, who has done so much on Face Book to promote the YouTube clips of the show puts this better than I could:

"The opening credits for the show were awesome. The perfect mix with the stained glass windows, the vigil candles, the priestly vestments, Ray saying mass, Leo in the confessional, all overlaid with shots of despaired homeless, and people on the street. Also the rebellious "Nothing" graffiti spray painted on the wall mixing with the calligraphy pen carefully scripting "Sacred" on paper, tells us the series is going to be a wonderful mix of faith and belief and the suffering of day to day struggles. I also love how it ends with moments of joy as we see the group sitting at the table together."

Kevin Anderson stars as Father Ray Francis Xavier Reyneaux, head priest, but with so many doubts that he is told by his superior to preach on the treatise by St. Thomas Aquinas, which gives its name to the episode. In the moving homily that concludes the episode it becomes obvious that the parish is

not named after the medieval doctor of the church, but an earlier St. Thomas, branded as “Doubting Thomas.” Before we get to this, the almost too jammed-pack script deals with the homeless and local opposition to their presence, the soup kitchen, a feminist nun’s insistence that God be addressed as both Mother and Father, Ray’s temptation to rekindle a romance with an old flame, the desire of his assistant priest to escape the turmoil of the city to a quiet monastery, the dissatisfaction of a pregnant parishioner at Ray’s refusal to answer her directly about abortion, and a broken father-son relationship. Whew! Lots to think about.

Kevin Anderson is ably backed up by a strong supporting cast: Ann Dowd as feminist Sister Maureen Brody, Scott Michael Campbell as the fresh out of seminary Father Eric, Brad Sullivan as the older, experienced Father Leo, Tamara Mello as the troubled church secretary Rachel, and Bruce Altman as Sidney Walters, a good office manager, but one who has moved beyond Ray in regards to God, considering himself an atheist.

I would like to cover the 20 episodes over the next year if there is interest among you readers, so please let me know at [visualparables@hotmail.com](mailto:visualparables@hotmail.com) if you might consider hosting a discussion group on themes found in the series. Believe me, there are plenty!

**To watch the episodes, go to:**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rA2q1btCx1A&list=PLE5FAD7955A1F6286>

**For Reflection/Discussion on Episode 1 “Proofs for the Existence of God”**

1. How is Fr. Ray different from the usual clergyman depicted in the media? Compare him to such movie priests as Bing Crosby’s Fr. O’Malley in *Going My Way*. He is by no means a perfect man: how do we see his temper get in his way? What

better approach might he make to the yuppie complaining about the presence of the homeless people? What happens to him at the city council hearing on the soup kitchen?

2. What do you think of the way in which the theme of temptation is dealt with? How is this an obvious one to raise? But do you think it is a bit early in the series? How might the two have justified themselves?

3. What do you think of Sister Mo's concern over the gender language used when speaking of and to God? How does this matter: that is, how is an exclusively male designation of God a part of the system that has kept women as second-class members of church and society?

4. What do you think of Fr. Eric's desire to become a member of a monastic community? Does this seem like a real vocation, or his desire to escape? From what you see of the chaotic life of the parish, might you also feel this way were you him? How do most of us try to escape at times?

5. What does Rachel want when in the confessional she asks about what she should do concerning her pregnancy? What does Fr. Ray apparently believe about human nature and responsibility that he refuses to tell her what she should do?

6. What do you make of Fr. Leo's quotation, "'When I see the world's wonders/What can I say?/I do not think/I'll kill myself today'"? Surprised that it was from a song sung by Lena Horne called "I Don't Think I Will End It Today"? What songs have kept you going during hard times?

7. Do you believe that faith and doubt are opposites? How are they related in a mature faith, some would say "intertwined"? Have you had to wrestle with this in your spiritual journey, and if so, how did you resolve the two? What do you think of the way that Ray arrives at his faith in God at the end of his homily? What similar small signs of God do you see that make you take the gamble that God is real and close at hand? Why might it be a good thing that we have the story of "doubting Thomas"? (Actually, when you reread the story was he actually doubting, or was he being dogmatic, refusing to trust the witness of his friends?)

8. Here's Ray's text to reflect upon (thanks again to Renard Roux's Face Book posting):

''I can't prove there's a God... though I do catch a glimpse of him from time to time. When I saw God last.. he was a father reaching for his son. And for a second, I saw God. It didn't make me feel any better.. but maybe that's not what God ...is for. I saw him. And I believe I will see him today, and tomorrow... on whose face? I don't know. And that's the adventure. So that's the best I can do. And that's faith. If you're looking for proofs... you're in the wrong business.''

9. How is having Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" playing under this and the baptism scene appropriate? As well as having Ray listening to the Lena Horne song at the end? How can this latter song be just as sacred at times as the song created for church use? Or do you think that this would mean that nothing is sacred?

10 You might close by reading or singing the hymn of a man who saw signs of God in nature, Maltbie Babcock's "This is my Father's World," esp. verse 2, "...in the rustling grass I hear Him pass; he speaks to me everywhere." How might ole Aquinas have gotten it a bit wrong, that instead of "proofs for the existence of God," we should be thinking of the signs for the existence of God?

## **Episode 2 "Song of Songs"**

J. A. Ortiz (Jose Zuniga) and Maritza (Judy Reyes), a couple who are to be married at St. Thomas run into problems when they have to shift their wedding reception from a hired hall to the parish. At the parish matters are chaotic, with Fr. Ray concerned about the cook Gary's sobriety, a politician named Mr. Martin showing up with a camera crew as part of his political campaign in which he wants to shut down the kitchen, a young volunteer named James echoing his father's opinion that those who do not work should not eat, the food for the wedding reception being mistaken by Sr. Mo and volunteers for a generous donation for the poor, and...

One of the lines that I have remembered all the years since first seeing this episode in 1997 is Father Leo's reply to Ray when the latter, tired of all the problems that have arisen concerning the soup kitchen, says that he wishes he could just deal with the mass, "The reason the mass makes sense is what goes on in the basement." The writers of this series are absolute in their conviction that faith and social concerns are inextricably woven together. As in James 2:14-17, the spiritual and concern for the material welfare of others cannot be separated!

### **For Reflection/Discussion Discussion on Episode 2 "Song of Songs"**

1. Did you have an inkling at how bad things would turn out when Maritza says she wants a "perfect day"? Have you had days a little similar to that depicted in this episode? What was your worst day that you can remember, and how did you get through it?
2. What is the purpose of Mr. Martin the politician bringing his camera crew on his visit to St. Thomas? Why is Fr. Ray so upset by the presence of the TV cameraman? How must his concern for the dignity and pride of the soup kitchen patrons contribute to their sense of well-being at the soup kitchen? In the folk hymn "We Are One in the Spirit" there is in the 3rd stanza the statement, "and we'll guard each man's dignity and safe each man's pride." How does Ray embody this?
3. What role do we see Sidney playing in the soup kitchen? He is an atheist, and yet how is his sense of hospitality very "Christian"? If you know the series All in the Family, how is Sidney like that other self-professed atheist Mike ("Meathead")?
4. How is the politician's reaction to the men cleaning up in the church bathroom totally off base? What are the homeless men trying to do?
5. What do you think of Louis and his story to elicit money? How do Fr. Ray and Sister Mo show they are pros in dealing

with him? Do you agree with those who say that the inequality of our society forces needy people into concocting such stories in order to gain money and food? What do you think of Sr. Mo's suggestion to James that it is better to be taken in by an "undeserving" poor person than to risk turning down one who really is in need? Do you have a plan for dealing with street panhandlers?

6. In several episodes Ray is concerned about health regulations and requirements for getting welfare: how do such regulations sometimes get in the way of helping the needy?

7. Ray, upset by the intrusive TV camera, takes Danny the cameraman on a tour of the basement: what do you think of his question about why there are so many hungry people when the Dow is so high (at 8000 back then)? What does this say about our society and its values?

8. As Ray reads the marriage litany and we hear the lovely song, what effect does the montage of shots of a drunken Gary falling on the steps and the hostile James sitting alone on another step? What do you make of the conversation between the boy and Louis, especially Louis' barb, "You've got more in common with that white guy than you think"? How does James seem to come around at the end? Do you think we might see him again at the kitchen?

9. Downstairs—what do you think of Sr. Mo and the volunteers' efforts to hastily prepare for the wedding reception? Maybe a bit far-fetched, and yet—? What signs of community do you see? What does Fr. Leo do to add just the perfect atmosphere for the couple's "perfect day"? Earlier Fr. Leo had said that the gospel text for the day was the Feeding of the 5000: how did this become more appropriate as the day wore on?

10. The staff thinks that it is sad that the storm canceled the flight that would take Maritza and Ortiz away to their honeymoon destination, but do they seem that bothered? What do you think of the passages they read: were you aware that The Song of Songs was originally a love poem before it was allegorized and accepted into the Bible?

NOTE: I really do want to hear if you are interested in more episodes on the series. The above took over 5 hours to repair, time that I cannot afford to give if the discussion guides are not useful. Please let me know at [visualparables@hotmail.com](mailto:visualparables@hotmail.com).