

## COMMUNICATION THEOLOGY

Topic: *Nothing Sacred*: Communicating Theology through Stories

Convener: Bernard R. Bonnot, Unda-USA

Presenter: Bill Cain, S.J., Creator & Producer of *Nothing Sacred*

Respondents: Kevin Bradt, S.J., Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley

Lynn Schofield-Clark, University of Colorado

A crowd of some 100 persons gathered for a Special Group Meeting on Friday evening. Bill Cain explained that he entered the Jesuits in 1965 as an heir of 400 years of Catholic and Jesuit *ex opere operato* Catholicism. In 1966 Walter Abbott's *Documents of Vatican II* collection landed on his desk. It encouraged his generation to get back to the *experience* of the founders. Nothing has been the same or sacred since. Rather everything has become sacred. *Nothing Sacred* dramatizes that transition of theological teaching and perspective as Cain illustrated with clips from his disputed ABC series.

Story is a way of knowing which gives access to understanding things which we cannot get at with propositions, theses and rational articulations. Story allows one to enter the mysteries of faith with all their contradictions. For example, we explore infallibility in the context of Peter's story, a man who denied Jesus three times.

Holy living is not a matter of achieving some abstracted perfection. Witnesses from King David through Jesus to Martin Luther King and Thomas Merton manifest godly life as full of contradictions and chaos. In fact, the contradictions give rise to much religious experience. The asceticism of religious life entails negotiating the contradictions and muddling through the mess.

The experience of being Catholic over the last thirty years has been messy and chaotic. Catholics today need to stand naked and unashamed in the midst of that chaos, affirming their experience of God there. *Nothing Sacred* is based on that experience and tells that story. Groups such as the Catholic League seem to deny that Catholics had such an experience or claim it was the wrong experience to have had. Even ABC shied away from the full story. *Nothing Sacred* tells the tale, plumbing its depths and scaling its heights.

The power of narrative and drama is that people see their own lives portrayed and find themselves in it. It lets them know that somebody is watching, taking note of the drama in their lives and giving dignity to their struggles. Such narrative affirms that they exist, that their experience was and is real, and that their experience is good.

In its twenty episodes, *Nothing Sacred* portrays many of the experiences with which the Catholic community has had to cope over the past 30 years: inner city poverty, rape, nervous breakdown, abusive parents, homelessness, the meaning of liturgy, abortion and homosexuality, the differing concerns of parish priests and bishops. The various characters in the drama embody and symbolize

contemporary dimensions of Catholic life. Sidney is the atheist who wants to believe; Leo is the wounded one who understands what wounds are for; Maureen is the woman with gifts and talents working in a church that will not use them; Eric is the young priest who embodies the old presumption of perfection and lacks sympathy for the faults of others; Ray's dysfunctional family makes it difficult for him to preach a resurrected Christ who still had wounds; Ray himself is full of doubt, but for all that a priest who cannot shake his Samuel-like experience of being called in prayer. He holds himself together by believing in his own experience.

*Nothing Sacred* tells its story through these characters and their experiences. It gives those who follow the stories access to an understanding which theological abstractions can never provide. It opens them to the mystery of contemporary life in Christ with all its contradictions. Perhaps that is why the program itself became a sign of contradiction.

Kevin Bradt accented God's gift of freedom and its role in human drama. We do not always use that freedom well, even with the help of revelation. Our 4,000-year tradition of Jewish and Christian living with the light of revelation affirms that God loves believers even when we use our freedom to make terrible mistakes. In fact, God keeps doing something important among us and through our lives. In a sense there is nothing big or sacred about our day to day existence; yet everything about our days is significant, special, sacred. Nothing is so profane that God is not there with us. Narrative is able to portray this complexity. *Nothing Sacred* sought to do so.

Media studies specialist Lynn Schofield-Clark proposed that in our culture media are the primary means for conveying theological meaning and they do it by telling stories. Television and other contemporary media provide the language through which people today understand their religious experiences and articulate their beliefs. The Church's traditional symbols and historic authority have been flattened. So to reach people, theologians and their church communities must take popular culture and language as seriously as they do their academic culture and theological language. *Nothing Sacred* resonated with many people's experiences and drew an audience with its considerable religious, theological and spiritual nuance. Media studies can help theologians understand how people use stories to find meaning. Then they can utilize the media to convey the central understandings of the traditions for which they are responsible, understandings which are critical to people's spiritual well-being.

In a small group session the following day, the AIDS episode of *Nothing Sacred*, which ABC declined to air, was screened and the values of the series further discussed. The role of media and narrative in theology received additional affirmation during the Convention in the Moral Theology Continuing Group when Presenter Tim O'Connell noted that the values moral theologians explore are not getting transmitted to the public through scholarship. Moral teachers need to utilize more imagination and narrative to generate *experiences* which embody and convey values. That echoes Anthony DeMello's conviction that "a faith-

inspired fiction is the shortest distance between human understanding and truth." To this the Communication Theology group says "Amen."

Next year the Communication Theology group will examine how changes in the dominant form of communication over time (oral to written to print to electronic) has impacted the development of doctrine.

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#### KARL RAHNER SOCIETY

Topic: Teaching Rahner

Convener: Robert L. Masson, Marquette University

Presenters: Jack Bonsor, Santa Clara University

Thomas F. O'Meara, University of Notre Dame

Carmichael Peters, Santa Clara University

Moderator: D. Thomas Hughson, Marquette University

The presenters' five-minute highlights of their papers, which had been distributed in advance on the Society's web page ([www.theo.mu.edu/krs](http://www.theo.mu.edu/krs)), provided an occasion for lively and wide-ranging discussion among thirty participants. The complete texts will be published in volume 11 of *Philosophy & Theology*. The participants reflected on varied experiences teaching Rahner either as part of syllabi in courses on broader themes or in courses devoted specifically to his work—and in a number of different contexts (that is, courses for undergraduate general education, majors, seminaries, and graduate programs). It was not surprising that in this group everyone reported finding Rahner a rich resource for teaching. The diversity in using this resource, however, was noteworthy. Some, for example, have had success utilizing Rahner's theological insights without the burden of his philosophical vocabulary, while others have found that introducing students to key philosophical insights provides a helpful entry into theological discussion. The papers themselves illustrated the variety of opportunities and challenges.

Jack Bonsor, who taught a number of years in the seminary, had his first experience teaching undergraduates last year. Although these two contexts required different approaches, his strategy in both cases was similar: "to help students think critically about the faith with an eye toward deeper appropriation." He gave three illustrations of how he used Rahner and the seminarians' personal investment in ministry as "hooks" to spark interest in serious theological reflection: (1) inviting them to work out how to make sense of *Lumen gentium's* apparent assertion that Church structures go back directly to Jesus despite