

**The media diary of an American priest:
Christian ministry in popular and news media**

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When I first began studying the representation of religion in news media, many of my friends remarked that I was in for a quick and easy study. There's no religion in the news, they said. Thousands of newspaper clippings later, I had successfully disabused myself and some others of this notion.

Similarly, when beginning this study of pastoral ministers as portrayed in news and entertainment media, I wasn't sure just how much I'd have to discuss. Once again, there has turned out to be much more material than a quick consideration would have one realize, and I could speak at length on any one of a number of aspects. Today, however, I will present an overview of my findings.

Like all content studies, there was the need to establish some sort of boundaries for the study. What, for example, should be included in a study of priests, ministers and religious sisters in newspapers – reports about American ministers working in the States? Or should reporting about Christian leaders outside America but appearing in American newspapers also be included? Where, for example, would a story about a religious sister born and bred in Iowa but working in various African missions for the majority of her life fall? Would readers of the article consciously make a distinction between stories about Christian leadership taking place in the U.S. from those taking place elsewhere?

Looking down a growing list of feature films with clerical characters, similar questions quickly surfaced. Is *The Mission*, a film which had enormous box office success in the U.S. but whose director and one of its major stars are not American but British, and whose story is not North American and is a few centuries old, be included? But how could such a film – as with many others, including the high-profile *Priest* – be excluded when so many Americans had seen it, and it had been seen in the context of other 'American' films and in turn provided context for

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films to follow? Even the distinction between fictional and non-fictional pastoral leaders tends to bleed across borders with television shows such as *Law & Order* featuring storylines lifted from the daily newspapers, and movies such as *Dead Man Walking*, which alters some facts while keeping most of the real story of Sister Helen Prejean.

The short answer is that I have consciously stayed away from making such distinctions, and have instead tried to analyze material that can be considered agenda-setting (for example, reporting in the New York Times), or with a wide reach, such as commercially successful feature films. In our increasingly shrinking globe it is not only more difficult to make such distinctions. I would argue that it is in fact counterproductive to construct boundaries of which most audiences or consumers of news will not be conscious or which have limited or less-than universal meaning.

There remains, however, one over-riding criterion: identifying content about those involved specifically in pastoral ministry, as opposed to the many committed and involved Christians who are generally considered laity. The media has become a melting pot, and mixed among the politics, comedies, sitcoms and sports are these pastoral people. As obvious as this may seem, the ways and means of locating them are key to understanding why and how they are present at all in the conglomeration of media representations.

Insofar as studies of news sources are concerned, keywords such as: “priest,” “minister,” “nun,” “pastor,” and “reverend,” form the basis for identification. Those people graced by newspapers and television news programs with honorific titles are most easily recognized.

Using these search words, here are the denominations of leaders readers of the Los Angeles Times, New York Times, Wall Street Journal and Washington Post would have read about during a four week period over September and October of this year¹:

- ? of 137 stories, 57% involved Catholic priests, nuns, bishops, cardinals or the pope
- ? 15 included Baptist ministers
- ? 8 involved African Methodist Episcopalian ministers
- ? 5 included Methodist ministers
- ? 3 involved Episcopalian ministers/priests

¹The time period for the information cited here includes September 12 through October 12, 2000. Paid messages, for example wedding and funeral notices, were not included, nor were advertisements.

There were also a number of independent, non-denominational, or unidentified ministers, but by far and away the Catholic presence was overwhelming.

Why?

For reporters, Catholics are easy to find and dioceses often employ media relations people. Because of the inclusion of international news, and the importance given coverage to the pope and other members of the curia, the Catholic presence in newspapers around the world – not only in the United States – is always large, and sometimes out of proportion to the number of Catholics in the newspaper's circulation area.

Certain papers had more stories involving Christian leaders than others, for a number of reasons, not least among them being the number of pages and amount of space available for news:

- ? New York Times: 50
- ? Washington Post: 44
- ? Los Angeles Times: 32
- ? Wall Street Journal: 11

Clearly the mandate of the paper (for example, the Wall Street Journal's business focus), as well as the amount of space given to reports specifically about religion affect the quantity and often the quality of the reports. It was also quickly apparent that certain papers featured certain groups. For example, the Washington Post coverage accounted for over half the reporting including Baptist ministers, while the New York Times had the most stories involving Catholic leaders. Again, the mix of local, national and international news found in each paper is somewhat accountable, as is the prevalence of particular stories during the time period.

During the four weeks used to generate these sample results, there was an ongoing story in the New York Times about the endorsement by members of various black churches, particularly AME leaders, of Jon S. Corzine, a New Jersey Democratic candidate for the Senate, and the disclosure that Mr. Corzine's family foundation had made substantial charitable donations to at least one of these leaders [Halbfinger, Jacobs].

There also was a story from Omaha that was picked up by Associated Press, and ran in several of the papers, about a large lawsuit settled by the Catholic church in a sexual abuse case,

as well as the attack by an axe-wielding Catholic priest at an Illinois abortion clinic, which also received widespread coverage.

These examples illustrate that while there are systemic reasons why some Christian denominations have leaders who end up more frequently on the pages of newspapers, sometimes, as journalists say using slightly different language, news happens. As much as content analysis can point to trends and patterns in coverage, news cannot and should not be governed by a quota system. Some weeks, months and years there will be a clustering of one type of religious group or denomination in the news, with small warning, and without, I would argue, any ulterior motive by the journalists involved in the coverage. It may be, however, that the public and their reporters become particularly sensitive to an issue, and it therefore receives more attention than it would do otherwise. This was certainly the case in Canada, when a spate of sexual and physical abuse charges were made against a group of Christian Brothers during the past few years. Stories about clerical abuse did receive more and more prominent attention than they had in the past.

If journalists can control the selection of but not the news possibilities, they certainly cannot allot timings to death. There were a fairly large number of obituaries printed for ministers – in fact accounting for seven per cent of all stories – including one for one of the only two ordained female leaders written about during this period, Episcopalian Diane Edson. (The other female minister specifically mentioned was AME Bishop Vashti McKenzie, who while very much alive, was en route to a mission in Lesotho following an appearance at Howard University.) One of the most relevant obituaries for this study appeared during the one-month time period cited here. Rev. Ellwood Kieser, a Paulist father who among other claims to fame, founded Paulist Productions, which produced the film *Romero* as well as *Insight*, a public service television program that ran for 23 years. The New York Times reported that Father Kieser's doctoral dissertation from Berkeley's Graduate Theological Union was entitled: "Cinema as a Religious Experience" [Weinraub].

Which brings me very nicely to visual representations of Christian ministry, particularly those appearing in fictional television and film.

In film and television, it is surprisingly easy to identify pastoral leaders: they wear black, roman collars or sometimes a veil. Very occasionally, someone refers to them as a minister. The crucial distinction separating the leaders from the rest of the community is not deed but

appearance and title. Increasingly, in news as well as entertainment media, pastoral ministry is defined not as a vocation but as a career, a trend which some who have written about contemporary images of ministry, including Donald Messer, have also noted within the churches themselves [Messer 1990:14, 21]. It is this distinction which, I believe, makes the Roman Catholic priest particularly attractive to those who for one reason or another want a religious figure to appear, particularly one who can appear without requiring much explanation.

There have been relatively few television dramas or sitcoms that have featured Christian leaders. The best known are *The Flying Nun*, *Nothing Sacred*, *Soul Man* and *7th Heaven*. Much has been written about the quick rise and demise of *Nothing Sacred*, a program centred on Father Xavier Reynaux, or Father Ray, which came under attack by some Catholic groups (notably the Catholic League) and was eventually cancelled after a single season in 1997-98. *7th Heaven*, a very popular family drama, continues to run and is one of Warner Brothers highest-rated series. Featuring an ensemble cast of family members, the show's official web site describes the Camdens as

a surprisingly functional family, enjoying close relationships despite their occasional differences and the usual problems that every large family faces. Eric (Collins) is a progressive father, who just happens to be a minister at the local church. Raising seven children leaves Eric and his wife Annie (Hicks) little time for themselves, but they still manage to keep their romance alive. Together, they're ready to face any challenge that comes their way on the roller coaster ride known as "parenting."

In the course of the series, Eric Camden almost never appears in clerical clothes, or in a church, or ministering to his congregation in any traditional way. His church seems not to be affiliated with any particular denomination. His chief role is as a father to his daughters and sons, and his career simply affords him relatively wide recognition in the community, and a particular challenge for his daughters' would-be boyfriends.

This begs a very important question: does a cleric need to be a central character to present a powerful, idealistic or realistic representation of what it means to be a Christian leader? For all the attention devoted to the priest of *Nothing Sacred*, you might think that Father Ray was the only priest appearing on prime time during the 1990s. But this couldn't be further from the truth.

Law & Order is one of American television's longest running and most successful dramas, now into its 10th season, and having spun off one related series. Critics and audiences have appreciated it for a variety of reasons, among them, the show's slavish adherence to plot

structure, with the first half-hour consisting of a murder investigation by police, followed by the judicial prosecution by the District Attorney's office. As of this season, however, no single character has remained a part of the cast from the beginning, demonstrating the ability to retain audience interest with a changing slate of actors. Many critics have noted that cop shows are contemporary society's morality plays, with police officers and detectives as both modern-day hero and Everyman.

Set in New York, *Law & Order*, created by Dick Wolf, has consistently included Christian ideas, themes and plots in its seasons, including notable portrayals of religious sisters, Catholic priests, and Protestant ministers and pastors. In some shows, the clerical figure is presented in the background, perhaps as a comforter to a family having suffered a loss. In others, the minister is front and centre: there has been a former Catholic priest arrested in connection with the bombing of an abortion clinic, a politically-active and visible African-American minister (a sort of Rev. Al Sharpton), a nun working in a home for female street kids wrongly accused of sexual abuse, a priest trying to shield his Hispanic congregation during a murder investigation, a minister called in to provide support to a fatherless boy, and a former priest found guilty years later of paedophilia, much to the soul-searching of one of his would-be victims, the cop who once served him as an altar boy.

The appearance of these characters within a larger television canvas presents particular opportunities. Without negating the possibilities for a show like *Nothing Sacred*, one must consider that most viewers will be more familiar with the stock cop and lawyer scenario than with life in a rectory. And there are certainly benefits to picturing the priest or sister or minister as another one of the people in the neighbourhood, playing a role within their community, being called in for questioning just like the deli owner or the doctor, sometimes being guilty and sometimes innocent, and generally interacting with other professionals and citizens.

The distinction between central versus ensemble roles for Christian leaders is also very relevant to representations in news media. While stories headlined: "Black Minister Criticized for Taking Corzine's Money" [Jacobs] will and should get immediate attention, there are also those such as "Mercy Smugglers' Help Alleviate AIDS in Mexico" [Mena] which happens to mention a religious sister as one of the smugglers, or "Fischer Returns With a Bang" in which a rising football star says he took time away from the game to "work with the youth group at Immanuel Bible Church in Springfield, where his father, Alan, is pastor" [Eberly].

Looking carefully at a number of mainstream sitcoms and dramas, Christian ministers have appeared on a wide variety of television shows, including everything from cameos in *Becker* and *Family Law* to a long-running reverend in *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*. Playing to a somewhat different audience, two of Home Box Office's biggest critical successes, *The Sopranos* and *Oz* have significant Catholic figures among their casts. In the continuing saga of the Soprano family, the portrayal of a New Jersey Mafia clan, there has been Father Phil Intintola, who sometimes showed more than platonic and pastoral interest in his female parishioners. While it is true that the image of the sexually-tempted priest is a stereotype almost as common as that of the Italian mobster, Father Phil's portrayal is far more in-depth than his forebears in the *Godfather* movie series, among others. The priest is as multi-dimensional as other characters, and Carmela Soprano has a very frank, challenging relationship with him.

Oz is a difficult to watch, often brutal series also produced for HBO, and written by Tom Fontana. The action takes place in Emerald City, a prison for hard-core male offenders. Again, while there are central characters, the series is an ensemble piece, with strong performances by those playing prisoners, as well as the warden, guards, and medical support staff. There are not only one but two Catholic leaders on staff: Father Ray Mukada, a young Asian-American Catholic priest, who as chaplain is usually dressed in traditional roman collar, black shirt, topped with a zip-up sweat shirt. Father Ray is joined by Sister Peter Marie, a middle-aged Catholic sister who is the resident psychiatrist and runs drug rehabilitation and reconciliation programs. She usually wears dark colours, a simple crucifix on a chain, and is quite heavily made up with greying hair. During the series, viewers learn little by little the past histories of these characters: Father Ray has run afoul of his superiors and been sent to Oz instead of continuing his studies, and Sister Pete was once a married woman before her husband was murdered.

As well as counselling their charges, Father Ray is shown celebrating Mass, administering sacraments, and praying. Sister Pete has experienced a crisis of vocation, and at one point seriously considers leaving her order. The characters are less than glamorous, and often act in ways both heroic and embarrassing. Fontana has said that the Sister Peter Marie character is somewhat inspired by his sister, who is herself a religious sister [Higgins 2000:60]. There has also been the occasional African-American minister intervening on prisoners' behalf, as well as a priest imprisoned for paedophilia, who poses a difficult personal challenge for Father Ray, and who eventually suffers a terrible fate at the hands of the other prisoners. The priest and

sisters also have non-Christian religious leaders who act as comparisons, including a key prisoner who leads the Black Muslim inmate community. While Father Ray and Sister Pete are key characters, they certainly don't have the spiritual lock on *Oz*.

In titling this talk, I quite consciously invoke the title of Georges Bernanos' novel: *The Diary of a Country Priest*. In considering all types and forms of representations of pastoral vocations, I felt a bit as if I were compiling a diary. Immediately it became obvious that the vast majority of representations of Christian clerics were, like Bernanos' main character, Roman Catholic priests, who as well as being male, are almost always of European heritage. However, there are significant differences as well: where the French novel is heavily constituted of long monologues and ruminations, the majority of representations I have studied are chronicles of action and almost never inner meditations of the type the young priest serving his community undergoes.

Turning to a consideration of feature films, many feature Christian rituals such as baptisms, weddings and funerals. With few exceptions, however, the people who enact and bless these rituals or sacraments are nameless and almost voiceless. Indeed, in a book discussing hundreds of instances of movie rituals – sacred and so-called secular – between 1945 and 1995, authors Parley Ann Boswell and Paul Loukides do not devote a *single paragraph* to any particular cleric. This strikes me as somewhat odd, since the officiating minister is the person who is the most visible distinction setting the traditionally sacred ritual apart from the others they catalogue, including birthdays and school graduations.

Their analysis proves only too well what another critic of the representation of clergy in film had to say. In the 1950s, Malcolm Boyd, a former advertising executive turned Episcopalian priest wrote: "Often a non-Roman clergyman is pulled in for a quickie marriage scene, of course" [Boyd 1958:48]. One need only recall the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, remember Andie McDowell and Hugh Grant, but rack one's memory for a single detail about the clergymen who officiated at the five ceremonies before finally remembering Rowell Atkinson (aka Mr. Bean) as the inept Father Gerald. When films do take notice of the officiator, it is often to lampoon: Peter Cook in the fable movie *The Princess Bride* is listed in the credits as "The Impressive Clergyman."

What does this suggest? It may well point to the situation academics have studied and many clerics have alternately sighed over or denounced: the large number of Christians who

connect, particularly with mainstream churches, only for rites of passage. The cinematic scenario is to have the scene take place in a church, to include some of the ritual, but the person of the official is nameless, and often almost faceless. This begs the question: is this presented as the reality of people participating in the ritual? And/or, does it influence the way in which they perceive the ritual in reality? It may be, for example, that some people 'attend' many more fictional funerals than actual ones. If so, what do they expect when they do come to the chapel or church?

There is a long history of representations of Christianity, particularly Catholicism in American film, and it has also been well-described and catalogued by scholars. The particular history of the League of Decency and the production code are also well-documented, and I will not go into these issues here. Suffice to say that the success of Catholic directors such as John Ford, Leo McCarey, Frank Capra, Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese have combined to create a filmic American canon. From what some critics saw as 'too much of a good Bing' in McCarey's films to Karl Malden's famous worker-priest *On the Waterfront* to Robert DeNiro as conflicted priest in a variety of films, including *True Confessions*, to the over the top George Carlin as a cardinal in *Dogma*, there are enormous varieties, but the priest continues to outnumber the nuns of *Sister Act* and *The Sound of Music* and completely outpaces the ministers of *Elmer Gantry* and *Footloose* and *The Apostle*.

Often in the midst of a study, there is an event which seems completely serendipitous. For this research into representations of Christian leaders, there was the re-release of *The Exorcist* last month. Serious study of film and religion does not often discuss the horror genre that *The Exorcist* in large part brought into being. It should be rather less dismissive.

The muscular, rugged and handsome loner priest embodied by Jason Miller as Father Karras is in vogue once again. In 1999 alone, there were two significant feature films with such central characters: Gabriel Byrne played Father Andrew Kiernan, a priest who investigates the possession of a young woman in *Stigmata*, and Ed Harris became Father Frank Shore in *The Third Miracle*, the story of a priest sent to investigate supernatural happenings attributed to an immigrant woman. The horror or thriller genre may not always be high art but the inclusion of Christian – read Catholic – characters as the last and only chance to save should comfort their real-life peers. That they continue to be recognized in this way speaks to a remaining sense and source of power.

This late 90s return to the hero-priest is, I would argue, a shift away from the negation of the Christian leader's heroic power in the 1980s and early 1990s.² Outside of horror and B-film lovers, few will have heard of a film from 1985 called *The Prophecy*, written and directed by Gene Widen. This movie is the ultimate anti-*Touched by an Angel*: instead of vaseline-smearing close-ups of Roma Downey, we get Christopher Walken as the exceptionally nasty angel Gabriel, Eric Stoltz as angel Simon, and an assortment of tough guys in overcoats and ugly faces as other avenging seraphim. The film actually begins in a church, with chant in the background and close-ups of angels carved in wood and stone. As the camera looks downward, it becomes clear that we are witnessing a Roman Catholic ordination mass. (However, apart from the bishop, celebrants and ordinands, the church is completely empty, which should be significant.) The central figure, played by Elias Koteas (another tall, dark and handsome type), is Thomas Dagget, the second seminarian to be called forward to receive the sacrament of priesthood. But as he prostrates himself before the bishop, Thomas sees a horrifying vision of the fall of the angels, causing him to writhe in agony and scream aloud.

The film flashes forward in time. Thomas was never ordained, and has become a tough cop, working nights and smoking. But he becomes entangled in a murder investigation when a copy of his thesis on angels shows up at the murder scene. To cut a long, rather silly story short, Thomas draws on his seminary training to translate an ancient book of revelations, and becomes embroiled in a second angelic war and yet another possession of a young girl. *The Prophecy* is the literal message that one need not be ordained to be part of God's plan, or to serve as a good Christian. The police officer becomes the secular stand-in for the warrior priest of *The Exorcist*.

The return of Fathers Kiernan and Shore, and the re-released Father Karras suggest that the red-blooded loner priest is back, at least for the first part of this decade, to protect people from the powers that continue to resist scientific explanation, as well as to buck the Catholic hierarchy.³ As one scholar suggests, the re-emergence is probably in keeping with renewed attention to religion by all forms of mass media: Margaret Miles notes that "when religion makes

² Consider how the minister played by John Lithgow is made to see the light by a young Kevin Bacon in *Footloose* (1984), or Whoopi Goldberg as nightclub singer leads a Carmelite community to recognize their true calling in *Sister Act* (1992).

³ There is also a sense that filmmakers and supposedly their audiences have been keeping in touch with the Jesus Seminars and scriptural scholarship: in a number of films, including *The Prophecy*, *Stigmata*, and *Dogma* there is the appearance of gospels and texts that higher ups don't want to acknowledge but which cannot be suppressed.

newspaper headlines, the cover of *Time* and the talk shows, it also makes money at the box office” [Miles 1996:50].

The Catholic priest provides seemingly unassailable boundaries in a media mix where such boundaries are – often overwhelmingly – permeable. (There is some irony in this position, since many film critics have pointed to the character of the priest in early American films as playing a bridging role between the immigrant Irish and Italian communities and the Protestant mainstream [Lourdeaux, Keyser].) You’ll know a priest as soon as you see him: he has that funny collar, wears black, and sometimes a scruffy cardigan. The priest is a man, a heterosexual man, and is supposed to be obedient, poor and celibate, have as his primary occupation the care of a parish, and be keeper of the sacraments and rituals. He will even be immune to certain types of prosecution, and be above the law when it comes to revealing things told to him in confession. His personal life should be the same as his ‘professional’ life and that life is of one type.

He will not be a football player like Reggie White. He will not be a politician like Jesse Jackson or Pat Robertson. He will not be a singer like Al Green. He’ll most likely be Irish- or Italian-American. He will definitely not be a woman, and he won’t even have a wife who may fall in love with an angel, or take up with the youth minister, challenge him about his work – or comfort and support him. He may have loveable street urchins to shepherd, but no sons or daughters of his own. He should have no worldly ambition, unless of course he has made it up the ranks to bishop or cardinal, in which case the rules will undoubtedly be bent, because these men are no longer priests, but members of the capital-C Church, the firm.

He will give you the definitive answer on matters of theology, and unless he’s one of those liberation guys, he’ll give you the party line, which is a big relief when you’re a journalist on deadline or a film director looking for a solid technical advisor [Boyd 1958:35]. He will even have access to strong spiritual powers capable of tackling demons, which even a journalist needs some days.

Unless the story is centred on the life journey of a minister, such as Robert Duvall’s remarkable *The Apostle*, the storyteller doesn’t want to have to spend time filling in the blanks. The Catholic priest comes ‘ready made’ for the teller and – so that teller *hopes* – the receiver of the tale. Whether this is right or good or even true is an entirely different subject. The findings of scholars such as Stewart Hoover suggest that the reception or reading of such messages by an audience is never quite the same as the creator or reporter intends.

But Roman Catholic priests abound because they come with a set of preconceptions and even stereotypes. While there can be bad priests, there is no question that they are real and ordained – unless of course someone is borrowing their clothes, a plot device in many films and television shows.⁴ This cannot be said of the Protestant peer, particularly those who are not Anglican/Episcopalian: who knows if they are a ‘real’ minister or not? What good would it be stealing their shirts and ties, or sometimes skirt? They look just like everyone else. They may in fact be a good huckster or scam artist, which is a different thing than a bad preacher or minister.

In large part, the infrequent representation of Protestant leaders is tied, therefore, not to who they are, but rather who their Catholic brother is not. As I have tried to illustrate, in a time when media messages are an amalgam of fiction and reality, when ethnic identities are hyphenated, gender politics continue to bubble, and nothing is quite as it seems, the priest is safe territory.

In conclusion, I’d like to highlight some preliminary questions for those studying and contemplating the representation of Christian ministry in American mass media. Apart from the important but straightforward identification of the gender, denomination and ethnic background of Christian pastoral leaders, I would suggest that attention be paid to the following:

- Do ministers appear as ‘title’ or ‘ensemble’ or ‘collateral’ characters?
- Who is consuming which portrayals?
- How does reality bleed through to fiction and vice versa in stories about ministers?
- How do representations of ministers and leaders affect real minister’s self-perception? That of their congregations?

⁴ *Sister Act* and *Sister Act II* with Whoopi Goldberg are examples of the female use of Catholic disguise.

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