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'Mad Men' -- a truly Catholic storyline

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Fr. Gill (played by Colin Hanks)

A review

My husband and I just bought our first house -- a 1920s Chicago bungalow we purchased from a couple who had lived there since the 1960s, which is when it was probably last decorated. We especially love the wood-paneled basement complete with bar.

It seems all things "mid-century modern" are back in vogue these days -- from Danish modern dining room sets to Audrey Hepburn fashions to smoking. Capitalizing on this nostalgia is AMC's Emmy-winning dramatic series "Mad Men," which premiered its third season this week.

Set in early 1960s New York City, the show depicts the lives of the advertising men and women at the fictional Sterling Cooper agency on Madison Avenue (hence the name). "Mad Men" has garnered much critical acclaim and become a something of a cult classic, prompting parodies on Saturday Night Live, The Simpsons and even one to come on Sesame Street.

But it's not just the period kitsch of men in thin-labeled suits drinking old fashioned and women in crinoline-puffed dresses talking on princess phones (and smoking, always smoking) that has attracted so much devotion that thousands of fans have created their own Mad Men avatars by taking an online "Which Mad Man are you?" quiz.

No, once again, it's this country's fascination with the 1960s as the emblematic period of massive social change (also evidenced by this month's media remembrances of yet another anniversary of Woodstock). What "Mad Men" does so well is to dramatically portray the dishonesty and pain behind the guise of the perfect Camelot life -- in the boardroom, bedroom and, in a new storyline last season, the church.

That's when Jesuit Fr. Gill (played by Colin Hanks, Tom Hanks' son) joined the cast as a visiting priest at the Brooklyn parish of Peggy Olsen, a secretary at Sterling Cooper who worked her way up to copywriter. Peggy has a deep, dark secret in that she abandoned a baby that was the result of a one-night stand with a co-worker. Fr. Gill learns about Peggy's past from her sister in the confessional and decides to make the young woman his personal salvation project.

While Catholic commentators (including Jim Martin, S.J. over at America) have debated whether or not Fr. Gill broke the seal of the confessional or why he wears a cassock and surplice when preaching on the day of the Cuban Missile Crisis in the Season 2 finale, most agree that the show gives a fairly accurate portrayal of the pre-Vatican II church on the verge of its own massive social change. A favorite clip: When Fr. Gill offers a "modern" grace before dinner at Peggy's family's home, her mother responds, "Are you gonna say grace now?"

Quite honestly, I hate this add-priest-and-stir recipe for making a show "Catholic." As a person of faith, I'm much more interested in the myriad gender and other justice issues on "Mad Men" than what the priest wears.

For instance, why isn't Fr. Gill concerned about all those philandering husbands (like Don Draper, Roger Sterling, Pete Campbell and pretty much every other man on the show)? Or that fiancés feel it's OK to rape their betrothed (like office manager Joan Holloway)? Or that the holy institution of marriage is so oppressive that married women (like Don's wife, Betty) consider abortion when a child comes at a "bad time" (like when she has just learned about her husband's affair)? Or, to be fair, that married men feel so trapped that they drink, smoke and sleep around their way to numbness (see list above)?

And if he's so concerned about Peggy, why doesn't he try to alleviate the sexual harassment and put-downs she and other women at Sterling Cooper have to live with every day? Or counsel her to remember Catholic social teaching in her career that encourages people to satisfy their inner desires by buying things? Or address the spiritual discontent that has her seeking fulfillment as one of the boys at work rather than in real human relationships?

Fr. Gill is convinced that Peggy's behavior must mean she doesn't believe in God, but she corrects him: She doesn't believe in his judgmental, vindictive God. Later, she is shown crossing herself before bed, a sign of her belief.

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In an interview, Matthew Weiner, the show's creator and producer, calls Peggy's pregnancy and abandonment of the child "a sin that is like murder -- probably the worst sin a young girl could make." That's quite an overstatement, even if it felt true in the early 1960s.

There is plenty of sinning to go around on "Mad Men," which is what makes the show so compelling as a study of the human condition. We all miss the mark -- a truly Catholic storyline.

But after examining our own sins on Sunday morning, on Sunday night (10 p.m., 9 p.m. Central) it's fun to watch and remember all those mid-century modern sins, preferably in our wood-paneled basement.

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