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Changes afoot in Catholic Hollywood

Joe Ferullo | Nov. 4, 2009 NCR Today

Catholics in Hollywood are usually a low-key bunch. The networking we do is focused on the people we work with, not the folks we may see at church. But that's beginning to change -- Catholics are making a new play for higher visibility in the entertainment business.

The changes come at two venerable Hollywood Catholic institutions that are taking a fresh look at what they are and what they can be.

Paulist Productions [1] was founded by Fr. Bud Kieser in 1960, and soon became a force in TV and the movies. Fr. Kieser moved easily among the Hollywood elite and worked to bring a Catholic ethic to films and television shows. In 1974, he established The Humanitas Prize, to honor works that delivered worthwhile messages -- and it remains one of the industry's most prestigious awards.

Just a few weeks ago, Fr. Eric Andrews came to town as the latest priest to head up Paulist Productions -- and he brought with him a unique background. Eric started out his career not in a seminary, but at a first-rate production company: Jim Henson Productions out of New York. There, he worked on a number of TV shows and films -- but he soon felt the call and joined up with the Paulists.

After nine years as chaplain on the University of Tennessee campus at Knoxville, Fr. Eric is now in Hollywood -- looking to increase outreach by increasing production.

The Paulists are already known for successful films such as "Romero" and "Entertaining Angels: The Dorothy Day Story" -- movies that were compelling mainstream stories that also celebrated Catholic heroes. Over lunch two weeks ago at a studio dining room, Fr. Eric told me he wants to do more of that, and work more closely with major Hollywood production companies in an effort to prove once again that good stories and stories that are good for you can exist side-by-side.

Outreach is also key these days at Family Theater Productions [2]. Based in a low-slung mid-century modern building on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, Family Theatre was founded in the mid-1940 by Fr. Patrick Peyton CSC, and quickly became a home away from home for prominent Catholics like Bing Crosby and Maureen O'Hara.

Photos of stars from Hollywood's Golden Era line the walls: Jimmy Stewart, Helen Hayes, Henry Fonda, Lucille Ball. The group produced hundreds of hours of short films and TV programs: Family Theater gave a very young James Dean his first on-screen credit in "Hill Number One;" it was the first company to hire a kid named George Lucas ("Star Wars"), as assistant cameraman on a short produced in the mid-1960s called "The Soldier," starring newcomer William Shatner.

Today, Family Theater still produces shorts, films and documentaries -- but under the direction of Holy Cross Fr. Willy Raymond has geared up its outreach program to Hollywood Catholics, and those interested in becoming Catholics. The theater now sponsors a monthly gathering called "Hollywood Prays," a prayer group

that includes music, singing, pasta, and -- of course -- some pretty decent red wine. It draws a growing crowd of younger actors, writers, etc. -- artists who are new to Hollywood and looking for a place to be themselves.

This kind of upfront outreach - by both Paulist Productions and Family Theater -- is bold territory for industry Catholics used to keeping the faith a bit more quietly. Maybe this time it won't stay quiet for long.

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Links:
[1] http://www.paulistproductions.org/
[2] http://www.familytheater.org/