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Ruminating on this year's Emmy nominees

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NCR Today

In the scheme of family, church, and world events, this Sunday's Primetime Emmy Awards show sinks to the bottom of most people's priority list. But if you are a hard-working writer, actor, producer, technician or assistant from all categories, awards matter. Especially to writers.

This Sunday is also the commissioning service for catechists and catechetical leaders at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels. I mention it here because of the media link. Five catechists who took the Advanced Media Literacy catechist specialization course at our center this summer will receive certificates at the ceremony, led by Archbishop José Gomez. As course participants tell us over and over, once you study media literacy, you never look at television the same way again. Maybe next year, one of them will take on primetime television.

Here are the shows that I think are deserving of recognition. My criteria begin with how well the show reflects human dignity. These are shows that I watch or have watched and TV movies I have seen.

Comedy

"The Big Bang Theory": It's smart, celebrates nerdism, is really funny, and why no one has nominated Kaley Cuoco for an Emmy is a real mystery. She has been a brilliant comedic actress ever since she outshone her TV dad, the late John Ritter, in "Eight Simple Rules." Some critics think the show exploits stereotypes. Of course it does, because all of visual media, especially comedy, use common understandings as shorthand. It's how well a show is produced, how much genuine humanity comes through, that matters.

"Modern Family": If you have never seen an episode of "Modern Family" and are under the impression that it is not a good show, please take 21 minutes and watch this episode that I call "Love and Shoes" but

the website titles "Disneyland." Good. Now we can have a conversation, because what follows will only make sense if you have seen at least one episode of the show. The three key character groups of this modern family: the divorced father/grandfather, Jay, who is married to his second wife, Gloria, and stepfather to her son, Manny; Jay's daughter, Claire, her husband, Phil, and their children Luke, Haley and Alex; and Jay's son, Mitchell, his partner, Cameron, and their adopted 3-year-old daughter, Lily. In this episode, the entire family goes to Disneyland for the day. Jay warns Gloria about the inevitable sore feet from wearing 4-inch heels to the amusement park, but she does not listen. Cameron puts the roving Lily on a "leash," much to Mitchell's disdain. Jay can't shake comparing this visit with the memory of the time he brought two of his kids when they were young to Disneyland after having a fight with their mom. At the Lincoln pavilion, he channels Abe and realizes that staying in the very difficult marriage until the kids were in college was his duty, and he's glad he did. Alex's boyfriend "hides" behind Disney character costumes because he is embarrassed he lost his macho job and has to work at the park. The part that most moved me was how Jay shows his love and solves the problem of shoes with shoes. I remain astonished at the writers, who are able to get so many layers of humanity into 21 minutes. Jay's family represents the new reality of today's American family (Catholic or otherwise), though it is not divorce and remarriage, but the gay couple with a child is what upsets many viewers. Certainly many families may not have gay or divorced and remarried members, but the reality is, many do. They always did, but we didn't see them in the comforting idealistic television of the '50s, '60s and into the '70s. Some viewers may not approve of the gay couple or the gay couple adopting a child on a mainstream network television show. The Catechism of the Catholic Church has clear teaching about homosexuality and clear teaching on how to treat homosexual persons, that they "must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity." This is how I interpret "Modern Family." After all, Thanksgiving dinner comes to all of us, when family members gather from far and wide, and "Modern Family" offers a way of being. When from one year to the next, you have no idea who will show up at the table, who they will bring along, if they will be the same gender as the year before -- and if they are moving back to the neighborhood and may be in your life every day. Television is entertainment and not Sunday school (the film critic Roger Ebert said this about film, but the same goes for television), and you do not have to condone homosexuality to find seeds of the consistent paradox that is the Gospel in "Modern Family." Yes, television does normalize behaviors and flattens values into a smorgasbord. But television is an opportunity for people of faith because it forms a metaphorical table around which we can gather and talk about things that matter.

"Nurse Jackie": Jackie, played by Edie Falco, is a Catholic, a drug-addled nurse, unfaithful wife, and mother to two little girls. She is a manipulating friend who lies, steals and uses people, often through sex, to feed her habit. But Jackie has a heart and under the very raw, rough exterior is a woman who struggles. This is deeply human dark comedy that shows light at the end of the tunnel because the only person I can change is myself.

"Girls": I reviewed the HBO "comedy" in May. It's only a comedy because HBO says it is.

Drama

"Downton Abbey": This addictive and elegant period drama from the UK about a World War I-era family of landed gentry living on a massive estate now threatened by class changes can take home all the awards possible and it will be fine with me.

"Homeland": This Showtime drama takes its inspiration from an Israeli television series and is the best on US television this past year: the best written, the best acted, produced, everything. A U.S. Marine, Brody, returns home years after the Pentagon announced he was missing in action. The CIA learns that al-Qaeda has turned an American, and CIA agent Carrie Matheson believes it is Brody. The performances of Claire Danes, Damian Lewis and Mandy Patinkin are remarkable for their ability to interpret the depth of their

characters' very being. Claire Danes amazed us as an autistic savant in "Temple Grandin" in 2010. Here she shows us once again that acting is art and that making a spectacle of oneself can be amazing as she handles the bipolar condition of Agent Matheson and lets us glimpse what it must be like to suffer mental illness.

"The Good Wife": Alicia Florrick left her philandering state's attorney husband and returned to work as a lawyer while still caring for their two children and navigating her crafty mother-in-law and the intrigue dealt by lawyers from every direction. She is a strong woman with flaws, yes, but with an innocence and integrity that permits her to be surprised by the constant stream of machinations, most intentional, by those around her. Julianna Margulies is brilliant as "The Good Wife".

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"The Borgias": Although I am a fan of series writer Neil Jordan and I liked most of Showtime's previous historical miniseries "The Tudors," I did not find "The Borgias" so interesting, though it, too, was centered around a powerful, depraved man who really lived. Jeremy Irons played Pope Alexander VI extremely well. "The Borgias" took so long to develop that I stopped watching before it brought in any characters I cared about.

TV Movies and Miniseries

"Hatfields & McCoys": This miniseries recounting a 30-year-old (1863-1891) deadly feud between two families was tragic, poignant and intensely violent -- just like the original story. The History Channel outdid itself with this production that gives an inside look at the anatomy of a feud, the misunderstanding, leaps to judgment and the tribalism over the force of law that fueled what is now a cautionary tale: Think before acting, because actions have consequences.

"Game Change": I reviewed this HBO TV movie for *NCR* in March, and though Julianne Moore gives a superb impersonation of Sarah Palin, I don't think it compares with "Hatfields & McCoys."

Reality TV

"Who Do You Think You Are?": This "reality" show about celebrities tracing their family tree was one of my favorites because I love history and genealogy. Too bad the network canceled it.

"The Voice": This relatively short-season singing contest is a welcome change from "American Idol." I like the format and the "blind" judging. (I hope we don't find out down the line that it is "constructed" more than it already is.)

"Project Runway": Who would have thought fashion design could be so interesting? I like the creative challenge of the short time and limited materials.

"So You Think You Can Dance?": When I learned several sisters of my community in the US watch this show, I tuned in as well. This is not "Dancing with the Stars" (which I also watch), but young people who love dance with a passion and hope to make this art form their life's work. I love it when young people do well.

Finally, yes, Betty White is a dear with a raunchy TV show "Off Their Rockers," a sitcom "Hot in Cleveland" and a 90th birthday bash. You decide.

You can download an Emmy ballot here.

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