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Video series 'Catholicism' to air this month

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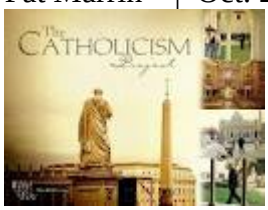

A new 10-part video series on the Catholic faith titled "Catholicism" began airing in October on about 70 public television stations around the country. It is the brainchild of Chicago priest Fr. Robert Barron, founder of "Word on Fire Ministries," a nonprofit media company located in Skokie, Ill.

Barron, a professor of theology at Mundelein Seminary, started the media ministry in 2000 to take his message to audiences who use the Internet and the new social media. His blog, Word on Fire [1], links visitors to his podcast sermons, cultural commentary, book and movie reviews in YouTube format. He is heard regularly on local radio and, from September 2010 to March 2011, had an early Sunday morning show on WGN superstation that was canceled because of lack of funds.

When appealing for donations to extend the show, Barron invoked another television evangelist, the legendary Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, whose nationally broadcast program "Life Is Worth Living" ran from 1951-1957 on the Dumont television network. Like Sheen, Barron writes all his own material and is the sole performer in his many media offerings, always in full clerical garb.

Barron's efforts over the years earned him public praise and then support from Chicago's Cardinal George for the Catholicism series, which raised $3 million in donations to cover its two-year production costs. Filming was done in 15 countries and 50 locations around the world.

The result is high production quality and artful editing that blends video postcards from the Holy Land and major Catholic shrines around the world with sacred music and classical art. These frame Barron's short commentaries on the Bible and 2,000 years of history before arriving at the present-day institutional church centered in Rome.

In the style and format of the Sheen programs, Barron is the lone narrator, explaining, instructing, inviting viewers to accept the logic of his claim for the church's absolute authority over religious truth.

The nature of the program as explicit Catholic evangelization may limit its appeal to most of the 350 public stations chartered to serve the general interest. "Catholicism," in contrast to recent PBS shows on Islam, the Mormons, or the 1999 "Frontline" examination of Pope John Paul II, is more commercial than documentary in any journalistic sense. Whether other private evangelical media companies will consider running the program remains to be seen.

"Word on Fire" has slots for the first four programs with its PBS partners, with the remaining six episodes moving to Mother Angelica's Eternal Word Television Network. An additional $1.25 million is being sought to

push the series to the global television market and for and distribution as an educational resource.

Why the series was made and why it is being promoted now is suggested in promotional language accompanying the project: "Today, the Catholic story is being told in the media, but it's being told by the wrong people in the wrong way." Barron's multimedia and other published works in the last decade have been promoted as a response to criticism of the church. His frequent appeals to past apologists for the faith like C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton and Cardinal Newman also reflect a view that the church is being treated unfairly by its critics, internal and external, and needs to be defended.

[Pat Marrin is editor of *Celebration*, *NCR*'s worship resource. Contact him at pmarrin@ncronline.org.]

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