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Producer priest navigates Hollywood in a collar

Megan O'Neil Religion News Service | Apr. 20, 2013
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No sooner had Eric Andrews arrived on the set of ?The Lost Valentine,? a 2011 Hallmark Channel movie starring Jennifer Love Hewitt and Betty White, when his neckwear attracted attention.

?People are looking at me, and trying to figure out who I was,? he said. ?One of the actors came up and said, ?Now, are you an extra for the wedding scene that is being shot???

But the Roman collar was no prop.

Andrews? credentials as an ordained Roman Catholic priest and Hollywood producer make him a rarity in both religious and entertainment circles. The 48-year-old describes himself as too liberal for most priests and too conservative for most agents.

But three years after taking the helm of Paulist Productions [1], a nonprofit Catholic production company behind television programs such as ?Insight? and feature films like ?Romero,? Andrews is reinvigorating the 53-year-old brand.

Two years ago, he hired Marybeth Sprows, a veteran of family television, away from Ron Howard?s Imagine Entertainment to identify and develop content for Paulist Productions. Together, Andrews and Sprows recently finalized deals to co-produce films for the Christmas season and Valentine?s Day.

Paulist Productions is hoping to adapt ?Tattoos on the Heart,? an autobiographical account of the Rev. Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest best known for his work with gang members in East Los Angeles. Andrews says the story has the makings of a gritty television drama like HBO?s ?The Wire.?

?I don?t want to do a sappy show,? Andrews said. ?I want a show that is real. I don?t care if there is sex or violence in ?Tattoos on the Heart? ? as long as it is not gratuitous.?

In some ways, becoming president of Paulist Productions returned Andrews to his roots. The New York native graduated from New York University Film School in 1987. He worked at The Jim Henson Company on shows like ?The Muppets? before answering a call to service and joining the Paulists, a religious order that embraces media as part of its mission.

?There was always the two different strands in life,? said Andrews about his twin passions for entertainment and for serving God. ?Joining the Paulist Fathers was an effort to put those together with a community that is more open-minded.?

After being ordained in 1995, he spent more than two decades working in parishes in New York City and in Knoxville, Tenn. Still, he kept a toe in the game, serving as executive producer for a PBS documentary about Jim Henson and making the occasional guest commentator appearance on FOX News and CNN.

In September 2009, Andrews was named to succeed the Rev. Frank Desiderio as the third president of Paulist Productions.

?He is very much in tune with what needs to happen in the church to make it more relevant,? said Vin Di Bona, creator of ?America?s Funniest Home Videos? and chairman of the Paulist board. ?He has become a good listener, and through that he has become a good administrator and creator. You couldn?t ask for more than that.?

No one at Paulist ? located on Pacific Coast Highway in a 1920?s-era building rich with Hollywood history ? pretends the work is easy. The Rev. Ellwood ?Bud? Kieser, known as ?the Hollywood priest,? founded the organization. Standing 6 feet 6 inches, he used the pulpit at St. Paul the Apostle Church in Westwood to solicit the talents of his industry-heavy parishioners.

Kieser also benefited from an FCC mandate that required stations to broadcast religious programming as part of their license agreement. Kieser filled a need, creating the television series ?Insight,? 30-minute dramas that explored contemporary social issues. Featured talent included Martin Sheen, Carol Burnett, Bob Newhart and Emilio Estevez. ?Insight? ran for 23 years and won multiple Emmy awards.

After the FCC mandate was scrapped amid the deregulation of the broadcast industry in the 1980s, Paulist Productions focused on feature films and documentaries. Some, like ?Romero,? the story of the assassination of the archbishop of San Salvador, and ?The Lost Valentine,? a romantic drama, were successful**;** others less so.

?They are in flat-out competition with every other production company in town,? said Jim McGinn, a veteran television writer and a longtime member of the Paulist board. ?They are trying to do good things, (but) it is a lot tougher road than it was when Father Kieser was doing it.?

Still, Andrews is confident there is a market for Paulist projects. And the company?s $8 million endowment means he doesn?t have to fret about day-to-day expenses. He, too, mines talent in the pews of St. Paul, where he lives and celebrates Mass regularly.

It?s not unusual for the professional to turn personal with Andrews at the conference table, Sprows said.

?I have found that executives and agents and managers and writers are much more open,? Sprows said. ?They will talk about personal things that are happening in their lives because Eric is a priest.?

Andrews said he doesn?t find his dual responsibilities as priest and producer to be at odds. He provides impromptu counseling when the occasion calls for it, but remains focused on forging deals and executing projects.

?We are trying to tell stories that transcend,? he said, ?that have depth and soul to them.?

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