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What Catholics can learn from Shark Week

John McCarthy | Aug. 11, 2013 NCR Today

I?m just as upset as you are. Shark Week is over.

If you?ve been living under a rock, or have no taste in television, Shark Week is seven days of ?jawesome? programming put together by Discovery Channel. Hour after hour is filled with epic close-ups of sharks catching their prey, jumping out of water, and lurking at the bottom of the ocean.

Since 1988 it has been one of the most popular segments produced by Discovery Channel and has been delighting armchair adventure seekers for over 25 years. With such success, Catholics should take away a few important lessons.

The most obvious question is: Why do people like Shark Week? Well the easy answer is because the leading character is interesting, mysterious and awesome. Luckily for Catholics, our leading character is interesting, mysterious and awesome, as well (throw in the fact that he?s the son of God and we should easily beat Shark Week in ratings).

Unfortunately, a big difference between the church and Shark Week is that young people seem to be leaving the church, while they still flock around the television for shows like ?Sharkpocolypse.?

Let?s take a look at one of the reasons why: Pop culture has created an aura of enthusiasm around the popular week and Discovery Channel has embraced it. They love the drinking games, shark-themed parties and consumer frenzy that surrounds the popular week. Sure, it?s hokey and sometimes over-dramatic, but hey, it?s fun! If Discovery took a different direction and only showed serious documentaries with serious scientists?no one would watch it.

This is the main takeaway for Catholics: Don?t avoid the culture. Engage it.

So often we hear church leaders and lay people alike talk about how the church must batten-down-the-hatches against the intruding secularized culture. While I agree that secularization is not a good thing, we must realize that we cannot bring people to the faith if we are cloistered away.

Years ago Catholics were great at one thing: knowing how to have a good time. When I was a child my parish had carnivals, active social groups and countless opportunities for meeting new people. It was a powerful force in the community that simultaneously brought people closer to God and each other. Maybe not every parish is having the same problem as the ones around me, but it seems as though fewer opportunities like this still exist, and less people are attending them.

Part of the New Evangelization should be a great re-socialization where we put the church back at the center of our social life (much like how Shark Week is the center of my TV schedule). We should allow new relationships to stem from parish life, allowing us to struggle with the faith communally. After all, Church is a lot like Shark Week, it?s not totally fulfilling unless you do it with friends.

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