

Culture



The cast of the television series "The West Wing" appears in a 1999 publicity photo. (Newscom/Album/NBC)



by Joe Ferullo

[View Author Profile](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

September 27, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Lawrence O'Donnell once [said](#) of his faith that he has a "flexible relationship" with Catholicism.

Flexible or not, the [veteran MSNBC anchor](#) was for many years a key contributor to a hit television show in which Catholicism played a significant supporting role: "[The West Wing](#)."

The series was centered on the White House staff of a fictional Catholic president, Josiah Bartlet*, played by Martin Sheen. "The West Wing" was [awarded](#) 27 Emmys and 98 nominations during its run on NBC, from 1999 to 2006. It remains for many the Hollywood ideal of what good government can look like, a show The New York Times [called](#) a work of "patriotic evangelism that appeals to our better angels."

This week marks the 25th anniversary of its network debut.

O'Donnell worked on "The West Wing" for most* of its seven seasons. In an interview with NCR, he said much of the show's lasting reputation for quality has little to do with politics or policy. It comes from the series' ability to "teach empathy and sympathy for other people's conditions." O'Donnell said creator Aaron Sorkin was "never going to worry that you might be exposed to people and ideas you know nothing about."



Lawrence O'Donnell in May 2024 (Wikimedia Commons/SWinxy)

That was rare for portrayals of faith on television at the time. "Religious people were either mocked, dismissed or depicted as teddy bears," said [Dave Graybeal](#), a Methodist pastor and author of the [book](#) *Faith in the West Wing*. But the NBC show, he said, "really looked at how a thoughtful faith can be reflected in the public square."

O'Donnell was closely involved in some of the program's most Catholic-themed episodes. Not unusual, perhaps, for a Boston kid [taught by](#) the [Sisters of St. Joseph of Springfield](#) at his parish, and by [tough](#) teachers at the all-boys [St. Sebastian's High School](#).

Catholic faith as a central thread in "The West Wing" came to the forefront, O'Donnell said, in an [episode](#) he worked on with Sorkin during season one, called "Take This Sabbath Day." President Bartlet — a devout Catholic opposed to the death penalty — must decide whether to commute the death sentence of a murderer in federal prison, or let the man be killed.

From the beginning, O'Donnell and Sorkin decided the condemned man would die. "We did it to counter that old Hollywood cliché, when the phone rings with a reprieve at the last minute," he said. But, more than that, he added, "I really wanted to see Bartlet, someone I fully respect, do something I would never do."

"My position on the death penalty is boring," O'Donnell said. "I agree with the pope. So it's an easy decision for me — but absolutism in drama is uninteresting."

The tension between Bartlet's duties as president and politician versus his convictions as a Catholic created a dramatic moral dilemma that a different kind of character might not face.

The episode is filled with religious moments. White House aide Toby Ziegler [confers](#) with his rabbi; Bartlet asks to speak with the pope. He also discusses St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas with a Quaker campaign manager. And — in the [final sequence](#) — Bartlet sits with his boyhood pastor, flown in from his hometown parish in New Hampshire. The priest, Fr. Thomas Cavanaugh, was played by 88-year-old [Karl Malden](#), in his last on-camera role.

Advertisement

When they are told the death sentence has gone through, Cavanaugh asks Bartlet if he wants to make a confession. The scene ends with the president kneeling in front of his priest in the Oval Office, rosary in hand.

"That's the first scene of the series where the president is not the most powerful person in the room," O'Donnell said.

For moments like that, it helped that Sheen is himself a [committed](#) Catholic. O'Donnell recently reunited with Sheen in Washington, D.C. "And Martin does what he always does when he sees me," O'Donnell recalled. "He goes into his jacket pocket, pulls out a rosary, and hands it to me, as he has done every time before. He keeps a rosary with him at all times. I have a large collection of Martin's rosaries at home."

For many critics, that authenticity was front and center in the [most acclaimed](#) episode of the series. It was another story with strong Catholic themes — and featured O'Donnell in his first acting role.

Titled "Two Cathedrals," the episode ends season two as Bartlet struggles with his faith after the death of his longtime assistant, Mrs. Landingham. In flashbacks, viewers meet Bartlet as a student at an elite prep school where Mrs. Landingham worked. The headmaster is Bartlet's father, a stern Protestant played by O'Donnell.



Martin Sheen, center, played fictional U.S. President Josiah Bartlet in the 1999-2006 drama series "The West Wing." (CNS/NBC)

Father and son [clash](#) over school policy and the boy's Catholicism, which he adopted from his mother. Young Bartlet argues for the Catholic belief that good works — not faith alone — is essential for salvation. The scene includes the father smacking his son across the face.

"Two Cathedrals" [ends back](#) in the present day, with an angry and bitter Bartlet alone in the National Cathedral after Mrs. Landingham's funeral. He's berating God — in Latin. Sorkin [has said](#) that, with this episode, he was looking to push Bartlet to a moment where this ardent Catholic would openly question his trust in God.

"And I can tell you for sure," said O'Donnell, "that this was the first time in American cinematic history where someone is speaking Latin conversationally."

That scene and others revealed how the approach to faith in "The West Wing" was a key ingredient to the show's success, O'Donnell said. "Faith allowed us to go into a character deeply. They open up in a religious moment the way they can't open up to friends; you go deeper than you can with friends."

Scenes with a rabbi or priest, O'Donnell added, "allow for what Catholics would call confessional dialogue," moments that let audiences learn more and understand more about a character.

Viewers responded 25 years ago — and still do. "The West Wing" drew audience [numbers](#) each Wednesday night as high as 25 million and the show remains popular two-and-a-half decades later. According to the Nielsen ratings service, "The West Wing" episodes have been [streamed](#) more than 212 million times since 2020.

And it is apparently still a hit with the current residents of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. The cast and crew, including O'Donnell, Sheen and Sorkin, [gathered](#) at the real White House last week, for an anniversary [celebration](#) hosted by First Lady Jill Biden.

But O'Donnell is not sure a similar series would work in today's climate. "[Donald] Trump has degraded religion in politics," he said.

To O'Donnell, Trump makes it obvious that everything is a crude transaction. He tells religious leaders what they want to hear, changes his positions whenever he needs to — and suffers no consequences. All the while, those leaders "know it's an act and they like the act," he said. They know Trump is "a simple-minded atheist."

"Simple-minded" is not how O'Donnell views the audience of millions who tuned into "The West Wing" every week.

"Sophisticated scripts and stories are what they signed up for," he said. "They wanted this show and its characters to be smarter than they were."

**This article has been edited to correct the spelling of Bartlet's name and the number of seasons O'Donnell worked on "The West Wing."*

A version of this story appeared in the **Oct. 25-Nov. 7, 2024** print issue under the headline: Lawrence O'Donnell on Catholicism in 'The West Wing' 25 years later.