

The spirituality of HBO's *Sopranos*

By Bishop Paul V. Marshall

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[This is Bishop Paul Marshall's September column for secular newspapers, usually different from his column in Diocesan Life. The column is sent to newspapers throughout our 14 counties. It is published by [The Morning Call](#), Allentown, on the first Saturday of every month. It usually appears also in six or seven additional papers during each month. The combined circulation of papers that publish the column regularly is about 400,000. Some 120 columns have been published over the past eleven years.]

One thing I heard most consistently while traveling in the U.S., the U.K., and Canada this summer was complaints about how *The Sopranos* ended, or failed to end.

It isn't easy for a writer of religious columns to bring up *The Sopranos*. The program is certainly a verbal and visual assault on what most of us consider decent, or even necessary, in story-telling. I wouldn't recommend it to my children or my parents.

Persons of Italian descent were in some cases offended that once again Organized Crime is portrayed as an Italian project.

At the same time, the program captured the imaginations of many Americans for the best part of a decade. Why? You can get gratuitous sex and bad language every night on Cinemax. There had to be something else that drew people to HBO's *The Sopranos* and got everybody from Dick Cavett to America's leading psychiatric professors to write about it.

Perhaps for most viewers the attraction was the invitation to identify with the complexity of the characters, the familiar interplay of personal and family issues, and the recognition of the attempt most of us make at one time or another to do one thing and try to teach our children to do another. Tony's attempt to inhabit two worlds does not work for him, and so begins his journey with Dr. Melfi.

Without giving anything away to those who don't know the details, what I heard over the summer in three countries was consistent complaint that after seven years, the series ends without much being resolved. Lots of people are dead, but the issues are all still alive, and danger lurks everywhere. None of Tony's problems are resolved.

To our unease at the unresolved non-ending, I suggest: *that's the way life really is.*

We are conditioned by the entertainment world to expect issues to be resolved, often with a happy ending, in two hours or less. Like Tony, we live with the fantasy that there is a magical fix to our problems, that we can go back to the security of childhood. In one episode he counters his daughter's desire to be a woman of her times by claiming that in his house "it is still 1954."

The Sopranos isn't going to teach anybody religion, but spiritual truths emerge quite clearly from time to time.

The first lesson has to do with humility and patience: life is complex and cannot be reduced to a set of black-and-white definitions, and most of us will die with many unresolved issues and our children will continue to struggle with them.

The second has to do with integrity. Absent psychopathology (“vertical splitting”), we cannot easily contain within ourselves wildly contradictory thoughts, actions, and values. Tony’s attempts to do so are part of what makes him a psychiatric patient.

Nobody in the series works hard to have the purity of heart that wills only one thing, and the results mirror what we see each day in a less entertaining way.

The third has to do with charity and boundaries. Because life is complex and everybody’s acts are determined by multiple motives and impulses, almost all of our judgments about other people’s souls must be held in abeyance, even though we can and must have boundaries about their behavior.

It is equally mistaken to try to focus on “the good” in Tony or simply to condemn him. Both must be acknowledged. Tony is *Everyone* writ very large, wanting to do the right thing but carrying the obstacles within him.

To dwell on these topics is to ask the right questions. It is part of what the ancient writers called “preparation for the good news.” To have the questions put so strongly in the guise of powerful entertainment may not be a bad thing at all.

[The Rt. Rev. Paul V. Marshall is bishop of the Diocese of Bethlehem, 14 counties of eastern and northeastern Pennsylvania. Additional columns and sermons by Bishop Marshall are available at www.diobeth.org.]