

Catholic or not, Homer Simpson's soul grabs Vatican attention, again

VATICAN CITY - The people at the Vatican newspaper weigh in on any number of serious issues, but they are now being challenged in the blogosphere after they claimed that Homer Simpson is one of their own, even if he doesn't know it.

In an Oct. 17 opinion piece perhaps intended to push some buttons, L'Osservatore Romano wrote, "Few know it, and he does his best to hide it, but it's true: Homer J. Simpson is Catholic."

That assertion predictably provoked some amused or sarcastic reactions on blogs and websites all over the United States, including from the show's executive producer, Al Jean. In an interview with Entertainment Weekly, he said, "My first reaction is shock and awe, and I guess it makes up for me not going to church for 20 years."

But, he is quoted as saying, "we've pretty clearly shown that Homer is not Catholic. I really don't think he could go without eating meat on Fridays - for even an hour."

An article Oct. 20 on the website of the Philadelphia Inquirer said that L'Osservatore Romano was "trying real hard to be cool."

The Washington Post titled a blog, "Is the Dope Catholic? The Vatican blesses the Simpsons" and asked, "so is L'Osservatore Romano truly so passionate about 'The Simpsons' that it is seeking a cartoon conversion? Or is this just a way to connect through pop culture?"

The Vatican newspaper column, titled "Homer and Bart are Catholic," referred to a nine-page scholarly analysis of the cartoon in the Oct. 16 issue of the Italian Jesuit weekly La Civiltà Cattolica. That article, titled "'The Simpsons' and Religion," asserted that the series "is one of the few television shows for kids in which the Christian faith, religion and questions about God are recurring themes."

La Civiltà Cattolica pointed out that the Simpsons "say grace before meals, and in

their way, believe in heaven.”

However, the article’s author, Jesuit Father Francesco Occhetta, said by telephone that L’Osservatore Romano had perhaps exaggerated. “That may be their interpretation, but we never said the Simpsons were Catholic,” he said.

Instead, Father Occhetta said, the fact that the series often deals with religion, even irreverently, shows that Homer Simpson “is open to the question of faith and God.”

The analysis in the magazine recalled a 2007 episode titled, “The Father, the Son and the Holy Guest Star,” in which Homer and his son Bart are attracted to Catholicism after meeting a priest (played by Liam Neeson) they could connect with.

“In that episode, the Catholic Church comes out looking good,” Father Occhetta said, although the depiction of a Catholic nun in the episode is based on an outdated, negative stereotype.

The Simpsons regularly and distractedly attend a church, presided over by the often ridiculous Rev. Lovejoy. Father Occhetta said that while the show lampoons certain religious figures, it shows the Simpsons are a family of faith and open to Christianity.

Producer Jean called the church “presbylutheran.”

The show criticizes “those who preach a Christian life but don’t live it,” Father Occhetta said.

He said it is in contrast to Walt Disney films where characters are only good or only bad. “In ‘The Simpsons,’ that’s not how it is,” he said. “Good and bad coexist in every person, just like real people,” which is why people keep watching, he said.

Addressing the fact that some parents don’t think the show is appropriate for children, L’Osservatore wrote that despite some “dangers” in the long-running series, parents “don’t need to be afraid of letting their children watch the adventures of the little yellow people.” In fact, it said, watching episodes together could furnish the basis for conversations about family life, school, society and politics.

And because the show is full of “skeptical realism,” young television watchers learn early on not to believe everything they see, the Vatican newspaper said.

The latest essay is not the first example of attention to Homer Simpson’s spiritual essence in L’Osservatore Romano. In a comment on “The Simpsons” when the show celebrated its 20th anniversary in December 2009, it said, “Simultaneously reflecting modern people’s indifference toward and great need for the sacred, Homer ... finds his ultimate refuge in God”-- even if he doesn’t always get his name right.