

Personalities, faith of Catholic Channel hosts attract listeners

NEW YORK - Tune in to "The Catholic Guy" on Sirius satellite radio any afternoon, and you might hear radio host Lino Rulli doing a round of speed dating, looking for a date.

Or, you might hear him interviewing a cast member of "The Sopranos" about growing up Italian-American, parodying a hip-hop song on "mock and roll Fridays" or extolling the benefits of going to confession.

On the free-wheeling, family-issues program "Speak Now With Dave and Susan Konig" in the 10 a.m. to noon slot, the Westchester married couple's banter on a recent morning ranged from the expanded opportunities for the Latin Mass to a planned interview with outspoken hard-rocker Ted Nugent on "parenting a teenager."

"We'll take advice from anybody," quipped Dave Konig, against a split-second instrumental clip of Nugent's "Cat Scratch Fever."

That same week, fellow host Bob Dunning's topic on his early afternoon program, "Across the Nation," was "Are video games addictive?"

All three programs are part of the daily lineup on the Catholic Channel, which has been up and running for the last eight months on Sirius satellite radio's channel 159. "It's very cutting edge, for Catholic radio," said Gus Lloyd, a veteran Catholic radio host whose "Seize the Day" program is the Catholic Channel's morning drive-time opener.

"That's what drew me here," he said. "We get to be ourselves, to show our human side. I tell people I've got the best job in the world."

Co-produced by Sirius and the Archdiocese of New York, the channel airs nationally seven days a week, 24 hours a day, featuring talk shows with listener call-ins,

football and basketball games from the University of Notre Dame in Indiana and live daily Mass from St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York.

Under the arrangement, the archdiocese provides all of the programming, which is then purchased by Sirius for its commercial-free, subscription network. To receive the programming, listeners must purchase a special radio and pay a monthly fee, with rates beginning around \$13.

There is no archdiocesan expenditure involved, said Joseph Zwilling, the archdiocesan director of communications, who also is general manager of the Catholic Channel.

Zwilling, who put together the programming lineup and remains actively involved in the channel's operation, said the goal in creating it was "to produce Catholic radio that reached out to people who ordinarily would never listen to Catholic radio."

"We wanted to use all of the modern popular radio techniques and formats and incorporate that with the Catholic point of view," Zwilling told Catholic New York, the archdiocesan newspaper. "We wanted to be fun, funny, topical and contemporary."

He said his only requirement was that "we must be unapologetically and totally Catholic."

"But at the same time," he said, "I would be very happy if somebody turned on the channel and listened because they liked what they heard - and didn't realize for the first five, 10 or 15 minutes that this was a Catholic channel."

Indeed, that happens with some regularity, said the channel's program director, Rob Astorino, who said he hears from listeners who are "practicing Catholics, nonpracticing Catholics and non-Catholics."

When they come across it on the dial, he said, they listen because they like what they hear. "We talk about pop culture, politics, different religions - all the things that people are talking about," he said.

New York Cardinal Edward M. Egan, who has been an enthusiastic booster of the channel and frequently promotes it during his public appearances, has a one-hour

program on Thursdays at noon called “A Conversation With the Cardinal.”

Moderated by Astorino, the show gives the cardinal a relaxed forum to speak on a broad range of topics that lately have included an explanation of the order of Mass, his enjoyment of this year’s Puerto Rican Day Parade and his youngest grandnephew, James Xavier Aloysius Egan, whom he had recently baptized.

In the “Catholic Curiosity Corner” segment of the program, the cardinal addresses questions and comments e-mailed by listeners to info@thecatholicchannel.org.

Sirius had approached the archdiocese several years ago about Cardinal Egan hosting a program. While that did not materialize, the talks eventually moved to the idea of a full-time Catholic channel.

“We wanted to make sure we had something for everyone,” said Scott Greenstein, president of entertainment and sports at Sirius, explaining the network’s interest.

“If there’s a large group in America, we want (to offer) something compelling and interesting to that group,” Greenstein said.

He noted that there are 65 million Catholics in the United States, making up 25 percent of the population, and that the network was positioned to offer them “a modern Catholic lifestyle channel.”

“There’s a lot of religious programming on Sunday mornings,” he said. “We had the bandwidth to create a whole channel ... something that the Catholic Church in the archdiocese would not only endorse and create with us, but which would also be reflective of how people live their lives.”

Although it’s too early to pinpoint the makeup of the audience, which Sirius does via periodic listener surveys, the call-ins to the channel are “quite extensive and getting busier as each day goes by,” Greenstein said. “That tells us it’s getting attention.”