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Broken: A Human Priest

Clergy in the Media Series

AUGUST 8, 2019 BY [JUNE MEARS DRIEDGER](#) [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

In the month of August, we are running a new series on the portrayal of clergy in popular media. We are interested in how faith leaders are represented in culture (movies, TV, books, plays, etc.) and how that reflects our current era and understanding of religion. Check back every Thursday in August for a new essay in this series. The following essay by June Mears Driedger explores the character Fr. Michael Kerrigan from the BBC show [Broken](#) (2017).

(Are you interested in writing for this series? There is certainly no lack of clergy in media. What is their role, and what do the depictions reveal about attitudes toward Christianity and clergy in particular? Send a pitch to skcook@CollegevilleInstitute.org.)



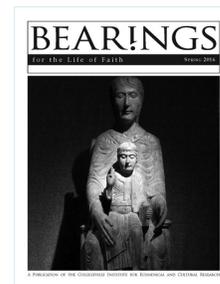
Sean Bean in *Broken* (2017). [Image Source](#).

The opening scene of *Broken* shows Fr. Michael Kerrigan preparing for Mass while praying, "Please God, not this time." As children and adults settle into the pews, Fr. Michael warmly greets the congregation, welcomes the visitors, and announces the upcoming First Communion ritual. He begins the Eucharist, lifting the host high above his head when the flashback begins with a woman bitterly saying to him: "Nasty boy—you should be ashamed of yourself." Fr. Michael's words falter as he

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freezes, and the parishioners notice his disorientation. He recovers and finishes presiding over the Eucharist. The flashbacks—"not this"—happened again.

Broken is about a Catholic parish and its priest in a struggling city in northern England. The six-part series, produced by ITV/BBC and [streaming on BritBox](#), contains several intertwined stories featuring Fr. Michael Kerrigan (Sean Bean). At the heart of the series is the need for love—God's love for humanity, love for one another, and love for oneself. Most strikingly, this series portrays a religious leader that struggles with his own need for redemption and love.

This series portrays a religious leader that struggles with his own need for redemption and love.

There is an axiom amongst clergy that "the preacher preaches what *they* need to hear." Fr. Michael needs to hear and believe he is loved. Fr. Michael speaks of God's love in his homilies and reminds those he meets with for pastoral care they are loved. He prays for individuals in pain: "God please show [x] how much you love her." As he lights a small candle during confession and pastoral visits, he introduces the candle with a variation of: "The candle is not Christ but a symbol of Christ, reminding us that we don't have to be afraid and that he loves us."

Fr. Michael is a compassionate, loving parish priest who performs the quotidian duties of pastoral life: tidying the pews, replacing hymnals, greeting the school children as they arrive for school, attending church committee meetings, and participating in community gatherings. Fr. Michael also participates in the challenging aspects of pastoral work: mediating a dispute between adult sisters, visiting the sick and anointing them, listening to confessions, counseling a suicidal woman, and aiding a devout single mother with her teenage son who is developmentally challenged. Yet undergirding his priestly work is a layer of shame and self-doubt. Through flashbacks, we learn about childhood emotional abuse from his mother, bullying from classmates, and sexual abuse by an elder priest who taught Michael in the parish school, which causes his disbelief that he is loved.

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A major incident that occurs early in the series and drives Fr. Michael's main inner conflict involves the church's most devout member, Helen Oyenusi (Muna Otaru), the faithful single mother of Vernon. As Fr. Michael returns home late one night, he hears the answering machine click on, and rather than answer the phone, he screens the call and listens: "Fr. Michael, could you please speak with Vernon so he will take his medication? Vernon always listens to you, Father." He decides to return the call the following morning as he had visited with Helen and Vernon earlier in the day. It is late, he had a very full day, and he is exhausted.

During the night, due to a series of events involving the police, Vernon is shot and killed. Fr. Michael learns of Vernon's death during Mass the next morning and is shocked. He visits Helen immediately after Mass and she says, "Fr. Michael, you were already in bed. If you'd been awake Vernon would still be alive." Fr. Michael doesn't correct her interpretation of events. He chooses to omit the truth despite providing daily pastoral care for Helen, including hosting her in the parsonage while her home is cordoned off by the police.

Instead, Fr. Michael allows her deep confidence and affection for him to continue as Helen repeats her version of events. His need for her confidence in his priestly goodness dovetails with his shame and doubt that he is beloved. Indeed, Fr. Michael says once during a homily that she should be his priest rather than the other way around. She is the plumb line of goodness against which Fr. Michael measures his own godliness. His guilt about his omission of the truth ultimately causes him to have a vocational crisis.

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Fr. Michael's guilt about his omission of the truth ultimately causes him to have a vocational crisis.

Fr. Michael doesn't tell Helen the truth until he is forced to tell the truth or be charged with lying under oath during the police inquiry. Helen is shocked and feels deeply betrayed. The evening of his testimony, Fr. Michael seeks her forgiveness:

Fr. Michael: "Please say you'll forgive me."

Helen: "Why didn't you tell me?"

Fr. Michael: "I couldn't."

Helen: "Even when you did tell the truth, you only did it because you were too frightened to lie under oath."

Fr. Michael: "Yes."

Helen: "You didn't do it for me, you did it for yourself, yes?"

FM: "Yes."

Helen slams her door in his face and refuses to interact with him during the remaining days of the inquest. Fr. Michael's fear of telling her the truth comes true — Helen's displeasure and condemnation translates as God's displeasure and condemnation, proving to Fr. Michael that he is unworthy of love.

In the final episode, the congregation realizes Fr. Michael is deep in a crisis of faith and wants to leave the priesthood. As each congregant approaches Fr. Michael to receive the Eucharist, they individually say to him, "Amen. You wonderful priest." Even Helen, for the first time since her rebuke, with tears in her eyes and squeezing his hand as she receives the chalice, says the words. Helen has forgiven Fr. Michael. He is loved and is beloved. He looks upward toward heaven and laughs.

As each congregant approaches Fr. Michael to receive the Eucharist, they individually say to him, "Amen. You wonderful priest."

Broken is a thoughtful, engaging portrayal of a priest who is earnestly following his vocation while doubting his efforts and effectiveness. Fr. Michael is dissimilar to other pop culture British priests solving mysteries like *Father Brown* and *Granchester* or joking around like the *Vicar of Dibley*. Rather, *Broken* reveals the joys and challenges of pastoral ministry as a priest attempts to embody the love and comfort of Christ.

Fr. Michael listens, he responds, he prays. He accompanies and follows up with the congregation. He struggles along with them and broods over them. Fr. Michael is a three-dimensional portrayal of a cleric in popular culture. Like all of us, he needs love from God, his congregation, and himself.

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June Mears Driedger



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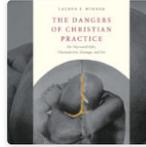
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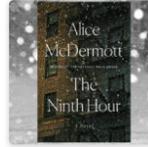
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