

Radical, Religious and Real: A Behind the Scenes Look at EWTN's Life On The Rock

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Life On The Rock, with a down-to-earth former financier and jock turned priest as host, is the only international Catholic TV program aimed at teens and young adults. Wearing his patched brown Franciscan habit, Father Francis Mary Stone features well-known guests on this fast-paced show, such as Jesse Romero, Tommy LaSorda, Kerri Caviezel, Fr. John Corapi, and Fr. Stan Fortuna.

Although the Thursday night (8:00 – 9:00 ET) show hits pertinent topics relevant to young people, Life On The Rock viewers have also favored a different sort of guest - the professed religious. Young women and men who have given their lives to serve the Lord speak boldly about their work and their journeys. Real people, just like you, your next door neighbor, your high-school sweetheart.

What's behind the success of this show? Father Francis Mary Stone began hosting the seven-year old Life On The Rock in late 2002, bringing to it a "straight-forward, no-nonsense, let's get real and honest" attitude. Young people have responded with a hearty and grateful, "Yeah, God!" With the moral authority to speak on issues that challenge young people today, Father Francis uses his sense of humor – occasionally referred to as "offbeat, dry, and a bit raw" – to bring joy, authentic Catholic truth and reinforce a positive spiritual reality. As spiritual sons of EWTN's Foundress, Mother Angelica, Father Francis and the friars are thrilled to continue the legacy created by Mother Angelica, renowned for her use of "holy wisecracks," in teaching the simple truths of the Catholic faith.

Father Francis has a special message for young men when he asks, "Is it macho to love Jesus?" He dispels the myth that church is for girls, and that real men don't cry, love Jesus or eat quiche. Father Francis says, "For a variety of reasons, sometimes Catholicism, really 'religion' in general, can be seen as overtly feminine. Though we certainly don't ignore the 'genius of women' on Life on the Rock, we do want to let the guys know that Jesus Christ was a true 'man's man' and the guys need to get on board." He and his fellow friars can relate to where the youth are "coming from."

"Most of us were originally moving towards careers, in or just out of college, and then we were thrown into something that we had never really picked on our own. Just regular basically decent human beings living our lives in the typical way when we were called. We want to show the world that reality of the power and truth of our Catholic faith."

As host of Life On The Rock, Father Francis looks for help from members of his community of Friars. This group of priests and brothers are the wheels that keep Life On The Rock in motion. Father Anthony Mary, the community's vocation director and Director of Postulants, joins him for the introductory segment of the show. Although he has no official title, he has been called "sidekick, co-host, and Franciscanator," according to the show's producer, Amalia Zea. Friends for 11 years, the two priests admit to a willingness to allow themselves to laugh at each other without compromising their dignity. Father Anthony takes a lot of fraternal potshots from Father Francis who is not afraid to reciprocate.

Father Mark Mary Cristina holds a degree in Physics and operates the popular "Friar Cam," giving the program a touch of "Reality TV." Deacon Dominic Mary Garner, who will be ordained to the priesthood in June 2004, serves as Associate Producer of the show, and is responsible for screening questions and emails. "We get lots of phone calls," he says, adding, "I can keep a pulse of the show and decide which emails or calls will be best to answer on-air. Having known Father Francis for ten years helps, too."

Brother Peter Mary Lawson regularly operates one of the cameras for the show and Brother Leo Mary, of EWTN's popular children's shows Faith Factory and Hey, Brother Leo, serves as Life On The Rock floor director. In working on the program, each of the friars gives up personal time that they might otherwise enjoy in a different community of religious. Truly living the lives of missionaries and keeping the vows of radical poverty, chastity and obedience exhibited by their founder, St. Francis of Assisi, these media missionaries are an inspiring and interesting lot.

The show's 27-year old producer, Amalia Zea, understands Life On The Rock's target audience. "It's basically the 20 something + group," she says, "and there's a lot of us in that group." But, Father Francis cautions against too narrowly defining the show's audience. "Maybe you would be surprised, but since lots of EWTN's viewers are older, many longtime viewers of Life On The Rock are senior citizens, and they love us!" As for the guests on the show, according to Father Francis, there is a litmus test. "It is their great love for Our Lady, the Eucharist, the Pope, great respect for Mother Angelica and a basic understanding of the mission of EWTN."

"How can you live the Faith out loud?" Father Francis has the answer: "Be proud of being Catholic. The guests are all boldly Catholic - without the baggage of arrogance. There is a boldness needed. Catholics can be a little beat back, especially right now. The world has done a job on Catholic moral teaching and with the scandals getting a lot of play in the media, we've just got to be bold. And faithful. And spiritual. And loud." Associate Producer Deacon Dominic, says faith is: "Not being ashamed of being a Catholic in our society. Not censoring what is being presented to avoid offending people. We hit contemporary topics but put the truth of the faith out there and let the chips fall where they may." And they do. Ever since the program began, Life On The Rock has communicated with today's youth. Says the Holy Father, John Paul II, "Youth of the World, you are my hope." Father Francis says, "That's what this simple show is all about."

Future guests to be featured on Life On The Rock include: Broadway star Jennifer Naimo-Morales, popular speaker and author Jason Evert and his wife Crystallina Evert of Catholic Answers, Ann and Susie Brawley, the Founders of Youth 2000, popular speaker and author Father Tim Devine, a blind Canadian priest, and the Sisters of Mother Mary of the Eucharist. Father Francis is particularly looking forward to an upcoming on-location episode on board an aircraft carrier with U.S. Navy chaplain, Father Joe Coffey, and covering World Youth Day 2005 in Germany.

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