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**"Family Theater on the Air:  
The Radio Ministry of Father Patrick Peyton, CSC, 1945-1952  
by  
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### **"Family Theater on the Air:**

#### **The Radio Ministry of Father Patrick Peyton, CSC, 1945-1952**

"The family that prays together, stays together" is an expression well known by American Catholics who came to maturity in the heyday of the Church during the 1950s. The idiom was coined by Patrick Peyton, a Holy Cross priest who gained an international reputation as an ambassador of the concept of family prayer. Father Peyton's message, that the family could be restored and strengthened through family recitation of the rosary, was rather simple, but the avenues engaged to preach this message throughout the world were complex and involved the use of every form of media. Beginning in 1942 and continuing for the next half century, Peyton preached the efficacy of the family rosary in an independent apostolic endeavor that made his name and ministry a household word for American Catholics.

This essay describes the origins and early years of Family Theater, headquartered in Hollywood, California, one of three primary vehicles<sup>1</sup> used by Peyton in his international crusade for the restoration of family prayer. With the assistance of literally hundreds of volunteers, including the leading names of stage and screen during the period, Peyton effected a minor

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<sup>1</sup>Peyton became internationally known through Family Rosary, Family Theater, and the International Rosary Crusades.

abiding. From it I derive the entire pattern and purpose of my existence.<sup>3</sup>

As he grew into young adulthood Patrick realized that there was little future for him in his native land. Thus, in May of 1928, following in the footsteps of three older Peyton children, Beatrice, Mary, and Ellen (Nellie) (and others from his mother's family), Patrick and his older brother Thomas emigrated to the United States, settling in Scranton, Pennsylvania with those family members who had preceded them. Patrick quickly got a job selling American flags door-to-door, but on July 1, 1928 he began to work as the sexton at St. Peter's Cathedral, under the tutelage of its pastor, Paul Kelly, who described him as "a most remarkable employee" one who was "conscientious and capable."<sup>4</sup>

Patrick's position at the Cathedral re-invigorated in him a deep-seated longing, with roots in his youth, for the priesthood. Knowledge of his brother's possible religious vocation was the primary rationale when Peyton's sister Nellie introduced him to Monsignor Kelly, hoping that the experienced pastor might help guide Patrick and his brother toward the priesthood. Kelly took an instant liking to Patrick and offered to pay the tuition for him and Tom to attend St. Thomas High School in Scranton, operated by the Christian Brothers. The two brothers began their studies in the fall of 1928. That same year four Holy Cross priests from the University of Notre Dame preached a mission at the Cathedral. The event was in many ways transformative for Patrick and Thomas, who, after speaking with their family and Monsignor Kelly, decided to enter the

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<sup>3</sup>Patrick Peyton, CSC, *All For Her* (Hollywood, California: Family Theater Publications, 1967): 5-6.

<sup>4</sup>Paul Kelly to "To Whom it May Concern" July 9, 1929, Patrick Peyton Personal File, AHCPE.

Congregation by entering the minor seminary at Notre Dame, beginning in September 1929.<sup>5</sup>

They both graduated in June 1937, with Patrick attaining *magna cum laude* distinction.

Patrick and Tom immediately began graduate theology at Holy Cross College, the theologate for the Holy Cross Fathers, located on the campus of The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. Tom lived at Holy Cross while Patrick, because of his dream of mission service, lived at the "Bengalese" Foreign Mission House located adjacent to campus. In October 1938, after completing one year of theology, Patrick began to spit up blood. Initially he kept his condition private, but after some time the condition only grew worse, leading to a full hemorrhage. Peyton was sent to a specialist who diagnosed him in an advanced stage of tuberculosis. He was sent to Providence Hospital in Washington where he spent three months, but his condition did not respond to treatment.

Peyton was thus sent to the infirmary at Notre Dame for more extensive treatment and recuperation. He received regular treatments for his condition at the Healthwin Sanitarium in South Bend, but his condition continued to deteriorate. Physicians recommended that he undergo a series of surgeries, procedures that would leave him somewhat disfigured and would reduce his physical capacities, as a last attempt to stem the progress of the disease. Patrick was in a quandary, but received important advice from a former teacher, Father Cornelius Hagerty, CSC, whom Peyton greatly admired. Hagerty told Patrick that he had another option--prayer. Hagerty relates the story of their conversation:

I exhorted Patrick somewhat as follows: Pat, the Irish people have fought and

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<sup>5</sup>Jeanne Gosseln Arnold, *A Man of Faith* (Hollywood, California: Family Theater Publications, 1983): 16; Peyton, *All For Her*, 18-19, 42-43; Patrick Peyton, "Personnel Sheet" n.d., Peyton Personal File, AHCPE.

suffered many centuries for the Catholic faith. In their persecutions and trials they had nothing to sustain them except faith in God's supernatural help. Think of the dangers, difficulties, enemies, persecutions, famines, pestilences they survived. Instead of putting your trust in modern science and the skill of doctors, why don't you stir up the faith that you inherited from your long line of believing ancestors. Think of the trust they had in the Blessed Virgin, the mother of God. She is an omnipotent intercessor. What she asks for and insists on she obtains. She is always as good as her children expect her to be. She has never failed anyone who had recourse to her with faith and perseverance. Since you have faith, why don't you use it?<sup>6</sup>

Patrick did what his former mentor suggested and prayed to Mary for a cure. Shortly thereafter doctors were amazed to find that his lungs were rapidly beginning to clear and the effects of the tuberculosis were reversing themselves. The medical people had no rational scientific explanation to what had happened. Patrick Peyton, however, was convinced that he was regaining his health and strength because of the intercession of Mary. He once stated, "When I needed her and her power and her friendship, she didn't forget that ever since I had been a little child and could open my mouth, I had used that power to say the Rosary; so when I needed her friendship, she was glad to give it to me."<sup>7</sup>

In an amazing reversal of events Patrick Peyton returned to Holy Cross College (because of his condition he abandoned his idea of foreign mission work) only one year after leaving. Having lost a year of study he fell out of sequence with Tom, but was granted an indult to be ordained with his brother and novitiate class on June 15, 1941 in Sacred Heart Church at Notre Dame. Peyton returned in the fall to Holy Cross College and completed his theology by May 1942.

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<sup>6</sup>Cornelius Hagerty, CSC, "Rev. Patrick Peyton, CSC," Anecdotes, 06-3 Peyton Papers, AFR.

<sup>7</sup>Patrick Peyton, CSC, Speech to Catholic War Veterans, May 1948, C1-6, AFR.

**The Family Crisis in the United States and its Solution**

The period between the two world wars saw American society mired in a family crisis that was felt and acknowledged by all. Prominent sociologists, such as Ernest W. Burgess and Ernst Groves, and special groups, The National Conference on Family Relations, founded in 1938, being the best known, proffered answers to the family dilemma, but American Catholics in general rebelled against these secular solutions because they gave tacit approval to divorce and spoke of children as "by-products" of marriage, ideas which directly contrasted Catholic teaching on the indissolubility of marriage and the procreation and education of children as the primary reason for marriage.

The best known Catholic respondent to the American family crisis of the interwar years was Father Edgar Schmiedler, OSB, Director of the Family Life Bureau of the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC). Schmiedler pictured the family as a victim of two distinct revolutions, industry and philosophy. The industrial revolution had transformed a rural agrarian culture into an urban machine culture. Accompanying this shift was the philosophical movement to an individualistic and rationalistic understanding of life. Schmiedler believed that the Industrial Revolution had undercut communal supports and supplanted them with geographical mobility and, consequently, movement to the cities. He sought solutions by identifying root causes for the problems experienced: "That our family life is showing alarming symptoms of disease and unmistakable signs of decay is apparent to all who care to see. ... There is every reason, therefore, to speak of conserving the family. It is high time for action on behalf of the home. Such action to be really effective will have to seek the causes of the family's troubles and apply the remedies

there.”<sup>8</sup>

One rather simple solution to the family crisis that may have been regarded as passe, unenlightened, or insignificant, was resolution to family prayer. Family prayer was viewed as a means to lift people from their worldly dimensions and “become a sacrament of love and unity” to society.<sup>9</sup> The use of prayer as a solution to the family crisis was made more specific through the suggestion of the family rosary. The Rosary, a special and highly efficacious prayer to the Blessed Virgin, was viewed as the vehicle to “make the return journey safely” and as a source of strength that can assist in the bearing of daily crosses, experienced most profoundly in the trials of home life. One commentator of the period wrote, “Indeed, the family Rosary is an excellent means of thwarting the attacks against homelife. ... Certainly the Rosary is the best private prayer which the family can offer. It is made to order for the family circle.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Family Rosary Inaugurated**

The reality of the family crisis, rise of family prayer as its solution, and the miraculous recovery of Father Peyton through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary combined in 1942 in the initiation of Peyton’s life work in the Family Rosary Crusade. During the final semester of his academic work at Holy Cross College, Peyton, reflecting on how he could properly respond to the great favors granted him by his return to complete health, found his answer. In a sermon a few years later he explained:

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12. <sup>8</sup>Edgar Schmiedler, OSB, “Conserving the Family,” *Catholic Action* 14 (January 1932):

<sup>9</sup>Gerald Meath, “Family Worship,” *Blackfriars* 23 (May 1942), 178.

<sup>10</sup>David Moriarity, “A Family Prayer,” *Dominicana* 30 (Autumn 1945), 187, 185.

In [January] 1942, a few months after my ordination, on a Sunday morning in Holy Cross College in Washington, I made a resolution that amounts to this--to spend myself until death to bring the Family Rosary back to 10,000,000 homes in America, and not to one less than that--and to bring [sic] the Family Rosary back to home life not for the month of May or October or Lent, but for always, and to bring it about that families will not consider God as their debtor because they wish to kneel down nightly together for the Rosary of Our Lady.<sup>11</sup>

The Family Rosary became for Peyton the vehicle through which he could repay the debt he believed he owed to Mary for her great gift of health.<sup>12</sup>

Peyton's dream began to unfold in June 1942 when he was assigned by the Provincial Superior, Fr. Thomas Steiner, CSC, as chaplain at the Vincentian Institute, operated by Holy Cross brothers in Albany, New York. It took little time before Peyton's work with the brothers took a back seat to his first love, the promotion of family prayer.

Peyton's initial effort to get his project off the ground was a coordinated and massive letter writing campaign to all the influential Catholic individuals, groups, and institutions that might be able to support his family prayer crusade. In August 1942 Peyton was able to enlist the support of fellow Holy Cross religious Bishop (later Cardinal) John O'Hara, head of the United States Military Ordinariate, who agreed to tell all military chaplains to preach the promotion of the family rosary for four consecutive weeks. Later that fall and winter Peyton, using the services

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<sup>11</sup>Patrick Peyton, CSC, Sermon, n.d. [1946], C2-11, AFR. See Peyton, *All For Her*, 68-71 and Arnold, *Man of Faith*, 26.

<sup>12</sup>In a speech to Catholic war veterans in May 1948 Peyton stated, "Why am I doing it? This is the reason: I am paying back a debt to somebody. I owe a debt to some one, and I am paying it back by doing this work for Our Lady's Rosary; for the one I owe the debt to is Our Lady. She took me off the sickbed, and she put strength and health in me again; and that is why as long as I have life, I intend to use the health and strength, not in a sentimental way, but in a challenging way so that men will go down on their knees in their homes and recite the family Rosary night after night for a lifetime." See Patrick Peyton, CSC, Speech to Catholic War Veterans, May 1948, C1-6, AFR.

of students at Vincentian Institute as typists and others as volunteers, sent letters to all the American bishops, presidents of national lay organizations, and all pastors describing his program.<sup>13</sup> In a second wave of mailings he wrote to Catholic colleges, high schools, and academies.<sup>14</sup>

The initial reaction to Peyton's efforts was quite positive. *Ave Maria*, while noting that the idea of the family rosary was not an innovation, stated, "Its re-introduction, inspite of handicaps, is highly desirable."<sup>15</sup> Albert Cousineau, CSC, Superior General of the Congregation of Holy Cross, told Peyton, "Undoubtedly, the Blessed Virgin Mary herself is directing this work. In itself the rosary is a powerful weapon. When the family recites it in common it becomes as strong as an army drawn up in battle array."<sup>16</sup>

The Family Rosary campaign received an unexpected boost in the fall of 1943 when Francis Woods, an Albany priest who joined Peyton's campaign almost immediately, was able to secure a fifteen minute slot for recitation of the rosary on a radio program, "The Voice of the

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<sup>13</sup>Patrick Peyton, CSC to Edmund Gibbons, August 15, 1943, "Report on Family Rosary," Archives Diocese of Albany (hereafter ADA), Albany, New York. Peyton reported that he sent letters to the U.S. Bishops on November 21, 1942, presidents of national lay organizations on December 8, 1942, and to pastors on February 11, 1943. It was not by coincidence, but very purposefully that the dates of postage were all Marian feast days. Peyton made an attempt to do all important things with respect to his crusade on feasts of Mary.

<sup>14</sup>Patrick Peyton, CSC to Albert Bauman, OSB, January 20, 1944, 02-2, Correspondence General, AFR. In his "Report of the Family Rosary for 1943-1944," Peyton gave some statistics of his mailings: Personal letters--1,400, Circular letters--17,000, Reports--3,000, Family Rosary leaflets--1,350,000, Poster--20,000, Sermon material--3,000. See "Report of the Family Rosary for 1943-1944," n.d [1944], Family Rosary Papers #2, AHCFL.

<sup>15</sup>"Family Rosary," *Ave Maria* (Editorial) 58 (October 23, 1943), 514.

<sup>16</sup>Michael Curley to Patrick Peyton, CSC, November 23, 1942; Albert Cousineau, CSC to Patrick Peyton, CSC, September 3, 1943, 02-02, Correspondence General, AFR.

College of St. Rose," broadcast on a local Albany radio station, WABY. The program, consisting of a prominent local family praying the rosary, was so well received that it led to a weekly program that lasted for two years.<sup>17</sup> In **find out date** the ABC affiliate in Albany, WOKO, granted Peyton a thirty-minute weekly program, called "Evening Time," that combined rosary recitation, and meditations. Unquestionably these first successful forays in the radio medium gave Patrick Peyton bigger ideas of how he might publicize his message of family prayer through the rosary.

#### **Family Theater on the Air**

Catholic radio broadcasts began in the 1920s, growing progressively in dimension, popularity, and significance. One of the most well known early efforts was the inauguration by the Paulist Fathers of station WLWL in New York in September 1925. This period gave birth to the radio career of Fr. Charles Coughlin, often known as the radio priest, but described by his most recent biographer as "the father of hate radio."<sup>18</sup> The best known Catholic program of the period, "The Catholic Hour," was launched on March 2, 1930. Broadcast nationally on the NBC network, "The Catholic Hour," sponsored by the National Conference of Catholic Men (NCCM), truly established radio as a powerful medium for communication of the Catholic message. This

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<sup>17</sup>Peyton, *All For Her*, 79; Arnold, *Man of Faith*, 41-42; "Radio Apostolate of the Family Rosary" Family Rosary Papers 507.04, AHCfE. One review of "Evening Time" in *Variety* stated, "'Evening Time' makes a great improvement over early (15-minute) broadcasts. ... Recitation of the Rosary is still the basic idea, but music, musicians, script and production have been added to give the feature smoother cohesion, wider appeal, and stronger listener pull."

<sup>18</sup>Donald Warren, *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin the Father of Hate Radio* (New York: The Free Press, 1996)

weekly program also launched the national career of Monsignor (later Bishop) Fulton Sheen.<sup>19</sup>

The rise of Catholic radio coupled with the success of Peyton's Family Rosary endeavor to date, especially the "Evening Time" radio broadcast, were catalysts to the priest's drive to secure a national broadcast of the Rosary. Peyton first inquired if "The Catholic Hour" would run a Rosary program, but his request was rejected. In March 1945, through the assistance of George Nelson of WSNY in Schenectady, New York, Peyton was introduced to Edgar Kobak, President of the Mutual Broadcasting System, and immediately asked him for free air time for a national broadcast of the Rosary. Kobak sent Peyton to Elsie Dicks, Director of Religious Programs for Mutual, who listened but initially was not impressed. Peyton pressed her, however, and she eventually agreed to a half hour national broadcast on Mother's Day, May 13.<sup>20</sup>

With permission secured Peyton had to quickly plan a program that would be a great success. With V-E day celebrated on May 7, President Harry Truman declared May 13 a day of national celebration and thanksgiving. Thus, Peyton was fortunate to have his program slated for an even greater day of national celebration. Peyton was able to secure the Sullivan family of Waterloo, Iowa, who had lost five sons onboard the *USS Juneau*, sunk in the Pacific theater, to lead the Rosary. Peyton chose five mysteries, the Annunciation, Nativity, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Coronation, to be prayed, accompanied by sacred music, such as the *Regina Coeli*, *Te Deum*, or *Ave Regina Coelorum*. Archbishop Francis Spellman of New York was

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<sup>19</sup>Richard Gribble, CSC *Guardian of America: The Life of James Martin Gillis, C.S.P.* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1998): 96-98, 118-19.

<sup>20</sup>Peyton, *All For Her*, 82-85; Arnold, *Man of Faith*, 49-56; Patrick Peyton, CSC, "The Story of the Family Rosary," 090-05, Family Theater History, AFR; Patrick Peyton, CSC to Thomas Steiner, CSC, March 29, 1945, Family Rosary Papers #1, AHCFL.

present and hosted the program, broadcast from the Guild Theater on 52nd Street. Peyton was even able to obtain the service of Bing Crosby, star of the popular movie, "The Bells of St. Mary's, whose voice was piped in from California at the end of the program, with a plea to restore the family rosary.<sup>21</sup> The May 13 broadcast was a great success as Peyton informed Steiner: "The reaction throughout the United States is the assurance I have that it was a perfect success, and I felt that in my own heart the moment it was over."<sup>22</sup> Patrick Peyton and Family Rosary were ready for national recognition.

Peyton's success encouraged him to reach for higher goals and seek a permanent radio program that would broadcast his basic message of family prayer. In the summer of 1945 he traveled to Los Angeles, California in an effort to enlist Hollywood stars in his family prayer campaign.<sup>23</sup> When he arrived he was granted hospitality at the Cathedral, St. Vibiana. He explained his plan to Monsignor Joseph Cawley, the rector and Vicar General of the Archdiocese, who introduced him to Loretta Young and her husband, Colonel Tom Lewis. The couple was

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<sup>21</sup>Patrick Peyton, CSC to Thomas Steiner, CSC March 29, 1945, Family Rosary Papers #1, AHCFL; Martha Martin, "The Man Who Made Hollywood Pray," *Catholic Digest* 12 (June 1948), 29.

<sup>22</sup>Patrick Peyton, CSC to Thomas Steiner, CSC, May 31, 1945, Family Rosary Papers, #1, AHCFL.

<sup>23</sup>The story of Peyton's trip to Los Angeles might be judged another one of the small miracles of his overall ministry. Travel in the United States after the war was difficult as tickets for public transportation were a premium commodity. One day in the Albany office Peyton was called by one of the Dominican sisters and told that his plane ticket for Los Angeles had been delivered. Peyton had not requested any ticket, but the nun receiving the voucher thought she heard the name Peyton. The ticket was apparently for a Fr. John Tracy. The mix-up allowed Peyton to travel to California and enlist the help he badly needed to move his rosary crusade to the national level. See Arnold, *Man of Faith*, 59-62; Eileen Gerwin, Interview with Thomas Feeley, CSC, April 18, 1999; Patrick Peyton, CSC, Radio Interview, June 23, 1950, C1-6, AFR.

very receptive to Peyton's ideas and wanted to assist in any way possible. Young introduced Peyton to Monsignor Patrick Concannon, pastor of Our Lady of the Snows, Young's parish and one frequented by many Hollywood celebrities. Concannon invited Peyton to preach at his parish on August 5 and to invite any interested stars to meet with him after Mass. At this time Peyton met Irene Dunn, Charles Boyer, Maureen O'Sullivan, and Ethel Barrymore. Before he left California Peyton had secured a written agreement from some thirty stars, including Pat O'Brien, Don Ameche, Maureen O'Hara, Bing Crosby, Gregory Peck, Shirley Temple, Jimmy Durante, and Jane Wyatt (besides those he first met) "to go on radio in order to popularize the Family Rosary and to spread devotion to Mary."<sup>24</sup>

In the fall of 1945 Peyton was back in New York knocking on the doors of radio executives in his effort to secure a regular free half hour slot on a national network. He met first with Eli Oberstein of NBC but the meeting was not productive. Peyton then went to his known sources, the people at Mutual. Through the assistance of Tom Lewis, who knew the industry, Peyton was able to speak with Edgar Kobak of Mutual, who agreed to give free air time, but only under four prescribed conditions: (1) Peyton would supply a first class program, (2) The program would be non-sectarian in content, (3) Each program would feature a major Hollywood star, and

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<sup>24</sup>Patrick Peyton, CSC to Archbishop John Cantwell, September 15, 1945, Family Rosary Family Theater File, Archives Archdiocese of Los Angeles (hereafter AALA), Mission Hills, California. Peyton, *All For Her*, 103. The actual pledge that the stars signed with Peyton read: "To offer our American families the most necessary and fundamental protection against the dangers of our age, and in order to bring down upon our country the special blessing of Almighty God, I am willing to help realize the proposed radio plan of popularizing the practice of daily Family Prayer." See Patrick Peyton, CSC "I Talked to Mary," *Extension* 43 (June 1948), 11.

(4) Peyton would be responsible for all production costs, including orchestra and writers.<sup>25</sup> The second stipulation, that of non-sectarian content, was troublesome for Peyton because if followed it would obviate the possibility of saying the rosary on the program. He spoke with Steiner and corresponded with Fulton Sheen, who both suggested that he should take what he could get,<sup>26</sup> but Peyton decided to make a couple of other attempts to get his exact wishes. Peyton ultimately heeded the advice of the well experienced Sheen and made arrangements with Mutual, which offered free time for 26 weeks as a trial run. The network offered Peyton a thirty-minute slot any night, Monday through Saturday, between 8 and 10:30 PM EST. Peyton reported to both the Superior General, Christopher O'Toole, and Archbishop John Cantwell, "If we can prove ourselves in these 26 weeks, they will never put us off the air."<sup>27</sup>

Plans for the first Mutual production became more intense as the new year dawned. The official contract was signed in January 1947 stipulating that the words Protestant, Catholic, Jew, interfaith, interdenomination, denominational, and sectarian could not be used in scripts.<sup>28</sup> While Peyton did not like the restrictions he had resigned himself to the reality of the situation. On the brighter side Edgar Kobak of Mutual was looking forward to the new show and promised a

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<sup>25</sup>Peyton, *All For Her*, 107-08.

<sup>26</sup>Arnold, *Man of Faith*, 68.

<sup>27</sup>Patrick Peyton, CSC to Christopher O'Toole, CSC, July 29, 1946, Family Rosary Papers #1, ACHFI; Patrick Peyton, CSC to John Cantwell, July 30, 1946, Family Rosary Family Theater File, AALA.

<sup>28</sup>Patrick Peyton, CSC to Jerome Lawyer, CSC, January 18, 1947, 06-02, Peyton Correspondence, AFR.

campaign of propaganda to support the program.<sup>29</sup> Peyton informed Mutual that Family Rosary would be ready any time after January 15 to begin the programs so the first date was originally set for February 6, but was changed to February 13 to allow more time for publicity.<sup>30</sup> Peyton was hopeful of success: "I hope that it [Family Theater] will be the best program on the air and will restore to the homes of the nation family prayer which is so necessary at the present time."<sup>31</sup>

The premier broadcast of "Family Theater on the Air," aired on February 13, 1947. The program, broadcast from station Mutual KHJ in Hollywood was titled "Flight from Home" and starred Loretta Young and Don Ameche, with Jimmy Stewart as host.<sup>32</sup> On this maiden broadcast Peyton told the radio audience that the program was dedicated to the family, "with the hope that families everywhere will always be together and that your home will be a happy one--with the conviction that prayer, simple prayer, will keep it that way."<sup>33</sup> The reaction to the first show was mixed. Some Catholics felt the program was too non-sectarian in saying nothing about the rosary, but in general the response was positive. Peyton informed Steiner, "The programs have begun.

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<sup>29</sup>Patrick Peyton, CSC to Family Rosary Staff, January 18, 1947, 02-01, Correspondence Peyton, AFR.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.* Peyton told his staff about the change from February 6 to 13: "The real reason is that it is a design of God and of Our Lady as great things have happened on the 13th during our age. It was the 13th that the big Family Broadcast took place and besides the 13th in my lucky day. It is also National Catholic Family Week."

<sup>31</sup>Patrick Peyton, CSC to J.T. Maloney, February 18, 1947, 01-06, Crusades Canada, Correspondence General, AFR.

<sup>32</sup>Family Theater Publicity Department, First Release, n.d. [February 1947], Family Rosary Papers #2, AHCFL.

<sup>33</sup>Jack Wintz, O.F.M., "Family Theater at 50: Father Patrick Peyton Remembered." *St. Anthony Messenger* 105(1) (June 1997): 18.

The general reaction of America is most favorable. Telegrams and letters are coming in from different parts of the country, and from the great leaders in the country--ecclesiastical and lay, praising the program to the heights."<sup>34</sup>

Family Theater on the Air's initial success encouraged Peyton to press further and offer special hour-long programs on significant national holidays. Shortly after the broadcasts began Peyton pressed Kobak to offer a special May 11 Mother's Day program, "The World's Greatest Mother," based on the life events of Mary of Nazareth. This program was to be more religiously centered. Narrated by Ethel Barrymore, five mysteries of the rosary associated with Mary as mother, the Annunciation, Nativity, Finding of Jesus in the Temple, Crucifixion, and Coronation, were placed on the program. The star-studded cast for the program, originating from Los Angeles, included Irene Dunn, Ruth Hussey, Rosalind Russell, Loretta Young, Don Ameche, Charles Boyer, Pat O'Brien, and Bing Crosby.<sup>35</sup> Buoyed by his continued success Peyton convinced Kobak to offer another special program to celebrate Christmas. Broadcast originally on December 20, 1947, "The Joyful Hour," narrated by Tony LaFranco, guided listeners through the Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary. Ethel Barrymore introduced each decade with MacDonald Carey, Jeanne Crain, Dennis Day, Pedro Cordova, Joan Leslie, Roddy McDowell, Ricardo Montalban, Maureen O'Hara, and Maureen O'Sullivan saying the prayers. Bing Crosby and Perry Como sang

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<sup>34</sup>Patrick Peyton, CSC to Thomas Steiner, CSC, August 26, 1947, Family Theater Papers #3, AHCFL. Peyton reflected upon the success of Family Theater, "The success of Family Theater's simple message is due to the fact that it states a deep truth which most listeners immediately recognize as such. It goes straight to the heart, perhaps touching the conscience on the way and in many cases awakening a nostalgia, a homesickness for God." See Peyton, *Ear of God*, 143.

<sup>35</sup>Patrick Peyton, CSC to Thomas Steiner, CSC, May 8, 1947, Family Rosary Papers #2, AHCFL.

Christmas hymns during the hour-long program.<sup>36</sup> Jerome Lawyer, CSC, who joined Peyton in 1945, reported another success to Steiner: "The reaction to the first broadcast was so enthusiastic and tremendous throughout the country that the Mutual Broadcasting Company offered it to the entire network for a rebroadcast on Christmas Day ..."<sup>37</sup>

The success of the first two special programs led to additional productions on special days of celebration. On March 28, 1948 "The Triumphant Hour," a dramatic presentation of the Glorious Mysteries for the Easter season, was broadcast for the first time. Starring Sarah Allgood, Don Ameche, Ann Blyth, Jerry Colonna, the Dionne Quintuplets, Jack Haley, Bob Hope, Ruth Hussey, Fibber McGee and Molly, and Jane Wyatt, the program was another triumph for Peyton and Family Theater. The *Boston Post* commented, "The Triumphant Hour ... a solemn and stirring reenactment of the glorious resurrection of Christ ... [was] one of the most inspiring observances of Easter ever presented ..."<sup>38</sup>

Family Theater on the Air was well received by critics and garnered numerous awards from the outset. Edgar Kobak led the parade of praise by calling Family Theater, "the prestige program" of his network. The press lauded the program for innovation, quality of programming,

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<sup>36</sup>Arnold, *Man of Faith*, 76.

<sup>37</sup>Jerome Lawyer, CSC to Thomas Steiner, CSC, December 29, 1947, Family Rosary Papers #3, AHCFL. *Variety* praised "The Joyful Hour": "Rev. Patrick Peyton, C.S.C. progenitor and director of 'The Family Crusade' series on Mutual brought this year's efforts to a highly inspirational climax last Saturday night with an hour's Christmas presentation entailing the services of 18 film and radio names. Even those outside the faith couldn't have helped but be deeply impressed with the subdued devotion, the fine dovetailing of dramatic narrative with music and the overall insinuating cadence of the program. The general effect was a thing of aural beauty and ritualistic power." See "Radio Apostolate of the Family Rosary," 507.04 Family Rosary Papers, AHCFL.

<sup>38</sup>Flyer "The Triumphant Hour" Family Rosary Papers, 507.04, AHCFL.

and its presentation of a morally sound message. *Radio Television News* described the program as the "best idea yet conceived by anyone to draw all types of listeners." The *Augusta Chronicle* praised Family Theater as "a gratifying experience ... to see some of [Hollywood's] principal stars ... employing their talents in the cause of righteousness and morality."<sup>39</sup> Family Theater received several awards for excellence in its first year of broadcasts. In Milwaukee the 18th Annual Radio Poll Award was given to Family Theater for "Favorite Program of 1947."

Family Theater on the Air had proved itself in presenting quality programming and had gained the admiration of secular and ecclesiastical groups, but the program would only be viable over time with solid financial backing. Thomas Steiner noted this need from the outset telling Peyton, "Looking at the activity from a business viewpoint, it does not seem to be stable."<sup>40</sup> Typical production costs for a half-hour radio show were \$20,000 weekly, but with free air time and donated services from the Hollywood stars the cost to Family Theater was approximately \$1,500 per week for script writers, orchestration, supporting cast, production management, and office personnel.<sup>41</sup>

Peyton's lack of financial acumen did not mean he was not able to deal shrewdly with the whole issue of economic backing for Family Theater. After approximately 18 months of broadcasts Peyton began to orchestrate an effort to get Mutual to pay the majority of the

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<sup>39</sup>Dorothy Klock, "More Things are Wrought," *Sign* 28 (October 1948), 47; Radio Apostolate of the Family Rosary," Family Rosary Papers, 507.04, AHCFE.

<sup>40</sup>Thomas Steiner, CSC to Patrick Peyton, CSC, July 31, 1948, Family Rosary Papers #4, AHCFL.

<sup>41</sup>Peyton, "I Talked to Mary," 11; James Connerton, CSC to Archbishop Francis McIntyre, January 19, 1949, Family Rosary--Family Theater File, AALA.

production costs that remained. This effort began with a stalling tactic on paying overdue bills to Mutual for previous broadcasts. Jerome Lawyer, CSC explained Family Theater's position:

Our purpose for stalling and asking for cancellation [of our debt] is part of a well-conceived and well-advised plan to get Mutual to undertake payment of Family Theater's production expenses. This plan was suggested by high persons in radio circles who feel, as we have felt for some time, that Mutual is getting the lion's share of benefits from Family Theater without contributing anything to the support of the production costs.

Mutual recognizes the great reputation of Family Theater. The network has no other dramatic program that will compare with it, either from the excellence of purpose, scripts, acting--or what Mutual brags most about--the great array of radio and screen stars on the program. ... While we realize that we are getting a lot of benefit in the way of getting publicity and putting our message across--we do not overlook the fact that Mutual is profiting greatly from our free advertisement and the consistently favorable (to Mutual) publicity that Family Theater offers. I know of no program that has received such wide and universally acclaimed [*sic*] recognition.<sup>42</sup>

Peyton's efforts were successful as by 1949 Mutual began to assume the expenses for the orchestra, musical direction, and production management.<sup>43</sup>

Securing financial security and legal incorporation of the ministry did not obviate problems that arose within the internal operation of Family Theater. This reality is most evident when reviewing the relationship Peyton held with several of the Holy Cross religious who labored with him. Peyton's single-minded devotion to cause and his work was difficult for many to understand. Joseph Quinn, CSC, who worked with Peyton for seventeen years, has commented, "He [Peyton] was so dedicated to his one goal that he was often not conscious of the needs of the

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<sup>42</sup>Jerome Lawyer, CSC to Thomas Steiner, CSC, October 27, 1948, 507.10, Family Rosary Papers, AHCfE.

<sup>43</sup>"Presentation on the Family Rosary Crusade," 1949, 507.38, Family Rosary Papers, AHCfE.

priests, sisters, and lay people who worked with him." A similar opinion was voiced by Jerome Lawyer, CSC, who was responsible for operation of the Hollywood office, "Don't work too hard. You simply can't do everything Fr. Pat suggests and stay, at the same time, away from the grave. ... Remember I have the first priority on cracking up." To his credit, Peyton did acknowledge that his zeal may have been too much for some: "I am longing to get back to personally undo any damage or unhappiness I caused, through tensions, strain and anxiety, to any or all of our great friends who are working consistently for Our Lady."<sup>44</sup>

Family Theater on the Air's immediate success was the result of excellent support and professional programming with well-known stars as headliners and outstanding support personnel. Peyton, from the outset, was able to enlist a circle of highly influential people to be members of the sponsoring committee for Family Theater, including Basil Harris, Chairman of the Board of US Steamship Lines, William Cotter, Director of Public Relations for Union Carbide, J. Peter Grace, President of W.R. Grace and Company, Edgar Kobak, President of Mutual Broadcasting System, Thomas Lewis, Vice President and Director of Radio for Young and Rubican, and Spyros Skouras, President of Twentieth Century Fox. From the vantage point of the average radio listener the great draw to Family Theater was the array of Hollywood personalities, such as Robert Mitchum, Donna Reed, Ronald Reagan, Alan Young, Richard Basehart, Jeffrey Chandler, Barbara Stanwyck, Jack Benny, Peter Lawford, Van Heflin, William Holden, and Barry Fitzgerald, who starred in the weekly broadcasts. Program hosts were also well known personalities and included James Stewart, Edward G. Robinson, Gary Cooper, Frank Leahy (the

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<sup>44</sup>Joseph Quinn, CSC, Interview with Thomas Feeley, CSC, March 16, 1999; Jerome Lawyer, CSC to John Murphy, CSC, February 21, 1950; Patrick Peyton, CSC to Jerome Lawyer, CSC, June 14, 1952, 02-01, Correspondence Lawyer, AFR.

famous Notre Dame football coach), Ray Milland, Don McNeill (the well-known host of the Breakfast Club on radio), Gene Kelly, Spencer Tracy, and even the Director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover.<sup>45</sup> Peyton understood the importance of these people to his success: "These stars are the foundation. If they break with me I am done for; the entire structure will fall."<sup>46</sup>

Successful programs, an array of stars, and high-level support became the catalyst to the rapid expansion of Family Theater on the Air broadcasts. While Jerome Lawyer, CSC worried that the program was not being carried by enough stations,<sup>47</sup> statistics show the opposite was the truth. When the program first aired on February 13, 1947 on Mutual it was carried by 180 stations. One year later Family Theater was aired by 352 stations in the United States, plus transcriptions to Canada and Armed Forces Radio. By 1951 the Voice of America was broadcasting Family Theater to such places as Australia, the Philippines, Japan, Korea, England, Ireland, France, Germany, Italy, and throughout South America.<sup>48</sup> Mutual estimated the audience for Family Theater in 1954 as being 3.5 million worldwide. One reviewer of the period wrote, "The [Family Theater] series has the distinction of being the largest sustaining program on any

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<sup>45</sup>Family Theater, Complete Broadcast List, n.d. Family Theater, Hollywood, California.

<sup>46</sup>Patrick Peyton, CSC, Speech to Catholic War Veterans, May 1948, C1-6, AFR.

<sup>47</sup>Jerome Lawyer, CSC to Bob Fennell, October 13, 1948, 02-02, Correspondence, General, AFR. Lawyer wrote, "I have always been under the impression that we do not have as many stations as we advertised have been carrying the program. Some of these stations will carry the program occasionally and then drop it for a time."

<sup>48</sup>"Family Theater Begins its Second Year on the Air," January 29, 1949, Bulletin, 06-04, Peyton Papers, AFR; "The Story of the Family Rosary," n.d. 507.28, Family Rosary Papers; "Family Theater: Its Nature and Purpose," n.d. [1951], 507.02, Family Rosary Papers, AFR.

network in the world.”<sup>49</sup> Peyton succinctly gave an answer to his success:

If you have a good product and are honest and sincere when you tell people about it, they'll buy it. If your product is any good they'll keep buying it. On our program we have the best product in the world, PRAYER. Through Family Theater we advertise it.<sup>50</sup>

Peyton himself was lauded for his efforts in the success of Family Theater. One commentator wrote, “His [Peyton’s] untiring zeal in getting this fine series on the air and keeping it there has now become legend.”<sup>51</sup>

Family Theater’s triumphant entry into the electronic media of radio was followed by an equally successful debut in the new medium of television. In April 1950 Family Theater presented “The Triumphant Hour,” a film version, aired on 62 stations, of the successful radio program that had debuted two years earlier. A star-studded cast lead by Pat O’Brien, Maureen O’Sullivan, Jane Wyatt, Don Ameche, Roddy McDowell, and the Bob Hope family, told the story of the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. Favorable responses spurred Peyton to make a television version of “The Joyful Hour” which debuted in December 1950 on 92 stations. The film, starring Pat O’Brien and family, Ruth Hussey, and Nelson Leigh, told the Christmas story through the Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary. Reviews of Peyton’s first two television ventures were favorable. “The Joyful Hour” was called a “notable contribution to television.” More generically the *New York Times* commented, “Father Peyton ... follows in his video film the precepts which have guided his FAMILY THEATER. His cast and his productions are

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<sup>49</sup>Klock, “More Things are Wrought,” 47.

<sup>50</sup>Patrick Peyton, CSC, Radio Interview, June 23, 1950, C1-6, AFR.

<sup>51</sup>Dorothy Klock, “An Afternoon on the Family Theater,” *Sign* 30 (October 1950), 65.

thoroughly professional, and he enriches his religious presentations with a knowing appreciation for dramatic values."<sup>52</sup>

By the close of 1952 Family Theater had been launched, placed on some financial foundation, expanded into two media, radio and television, and been well received by secular and ecclesiastical individuals and groups. Al Scalpone, a marketing executive for the media, encouraged Peyton to keep on the offensive with his campaign: "With radio and television you can accomplish--nay, are accomplishing -- the objective of the crusade on a scale never dreamed possible before the age of electronics."<sup>53</sup> Thomas O'Neill, Chairman of the Board of Mutual praised Peyton's accomplishments:

I am happy to be privileged to join with your many other friends at this time in paying to you my sincere and everlasting tribute for your stimulating and inspirational work in bringing to millions your theme that "The family that prays together--stays together." ... It is our cherished hope that for many years to come it may be our privilege and pleasure to participate with you in bringing to millions of American families these now nationally known [and] worthwhile programs.<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusion

The mission and ministry of Father Patrick Peyton through his crusade for Family Prayer, initiated in 1942 continued until in death in June 1992. Family Theater produced original radio programs until January 1962 and aired repeat shows until 1968; its film division continues to create quality works, such as the recently acclaimed production on the life of Cardinal Joseph Bernadin of Chicago. Family Theater represents only a portion of the life's work of Patrick

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<sup>52</sup>Found in Flyer, "The Joyful Hour," 507.04, Family Rosary Papers, AHCFF.

<sup>53</sup>Al Scalpone to Patrick Peyton, CSC, n.d. [1952], 02-01, Correspondence Peyton, AFR.

<sup>54</sup>Thomas F. O'Neill to Patrick Peyton, CSC, April 14, 1952, 09-05 Family Theater History, AFR.

Peyton, whose international rosary crusades set a standard for the proclamation of family prayer and the rosary in the twentieth century. While it is clear that Peyton's life work was a response to special favors rendered him through the intercession of the Mary, the Mother of God, the Family Rosary campaign was truly born in a small three-room thatched cottage in Carrasastle County Mayo when a little boy observed his parents and siblings kneel down in the common room every evening and pray the rosary. For Patrick Peyton family prayer was the answer to the crisis that plagued families worldwide. His message was simple, "The family that prays together stays together" yet its delivery was powerful and resourceful, utilizing all the means that modern technology could provide. Christians today might learn a new lesson from an old play book.