

[Contact us](#)

Reaching kids through rock music, Scully's a new kind of radio priest

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.
NCR Staff
Hays, Kan.

"I coulda been a contender," Marlon Brando says in that famous, anguished scene from *On the Waterfront*. "I coulda been somebody."

For many people, the remembrance of things past is a lot like that. Reflection on paths not taken can evoke regret -- sometimes sad, sometimes bitter and often both.

But not so Capuchin Fr. Michael Scully.

The 57-year-old Scully could have been a very public somebody, at least within Catholic circles. He's had offers, and continues to have them regularly, to become a media personality on a national scale.

Scully is the host of a radio show on an FM station in western Kansas. His show, called "Message at the Top," features the current top 10 pop songs, spun along with Scully's engaging, youth-friendly insights on life, relationships and God.

Scully has been approached several times about syndicating the show and making it into a full-time gig. He's also had requests to join the lecture circuit, hitting high-profile events such as the Religious Education Congress in the Los Angeles archdiocese.

He's turned them all down.

Instead, Scully's got two very demanding full-time jobs. He serves as the pastor of St. Joseph's Parish in Hays, Kan., a community which, despite its relatively small size -- 17,000 -- has a high concentration of active Catholics. Scully is also the president of Thomas More Prep-Marian High School, also in Hays, a school that perched on the brink of financial disaster before Scully assembled a team to bring it back to life. This work is in addition to preparing his weekly radio show and appearing at regional youth leadership seminars.

In his spare time, Scully is the author of a series of reflections for young people on modern music called *The Message of Rock*, put out by Hi-Time Press, a Catholic publishing house in Milwaukee. He has also launched a *Message of Film* series.

Of his invitations to wider fame, Scully said, "I have chosen not even to think about doing it. I know that I said to the Capuchin Franciscans, 'I am vowing my life to you.' There's no question, no regrets. I know they need me as a pastor."

But isn't there a tiny part of him that thinks it would be a kick to be a Catholic version of Casey Kasum, host of "American Top 40"?

"Absolutely," Scully said. "I think I would have more fun doing that. But given the circumstances that we're in right now, I'm needed where I am."

To some extent, then, the story of Mike Scully is what might have been. But for Scully himself, it's much more a story of what has been -- a life that, for all its other possibilities, continues to be richly rewarding in its own way.

Something to do

Scully has devoted much of his career to working with young people, as a teacher, pastor, youth minister and school administrator, in addition to reaching out to them through books and radio. He got started spinning records the same way a lot of teachers stumble onto their hobbies -- desperation for something to do in class.

"I was trying to teach religion to high school kids," Scully says of his first days as a teacher in the late 1960s. "I thought, what in God's name am I going to do?"

Then he took a good look at how his kids spent their spare time. "The kids were listening to music, modern rock music, and that interested me. The songs were talking to them, and I was talking religion to them, and many times the two did not jive. The thought came to me, let's try to tie them in."

There was, of course, another motive. "I also figured it might make the class more interesting," he said.

Something clicked. "I had their attention," he said. "Using the medium of music as a point of departure, I was able to talk to them about life."

That is not to say that Scully's upbeat, inspiring approach popped into being full-blown. At first, Scully was more like Howard Beal from the movie "Network," an angry prophet who was mad as hell and not going to take it anymore.

"My approach was totally negative," Scully recalled. "I was appalled by a lot of these songs. I was very much against many of their lyrics and I went in it with that attitude, thinking this was bad and I was going to set things right."

How times have changed. Today, Scully takes the music as it comes.

"Now I don't condemn," Scully said. "I accept rock, rap, alternative, whatever -- some of which is actually very good -- as a statement of where kids are at and what they're thinking. Then I use it as a chance to talk about values."

That's the approach that has carried Scully onto the airwaves. In the early 1980s, he was approached by an FM station in the area to do a show -- a radio version of what he was already doing in the classroom.

He's been doing it ever since. The format has not changed much over the years: Scully up top with a few comments, then the Billboard "Top 10," interspersed with reflections that cull life lessons from the lyrics. The tone is fast, friendly, and Scully doesn't waste time making his point -- an approach consciously crafted for MTV-generation youth.

Scully gently leads listeners -- especially the young ones attracted by the tunes -- to consider some deeper questions. He sees himself as planting seeds, not tilting at windmills.

'Foolish Games'

Music yields the greatest pedagogical harvest for Scully in the classroom, where several factors work in his favor: time, facilities, rapport -- and, it has to be admitted, mandatory attendance, which allows him to press on even when interest flags, a luxury he doesn't have on the air facing a station-switching public.

Although his radio program requires Scully to comment on each week's top 10 songs, only a few tunes become part of his extended classroom and textbook repertoire. One that has captured his fancy of late is Jewel's "Foolish Games," which will be featured in his latest Message of Rock book. At the time of this interview, the song was #2 on the Billboard charts in the adult contemporary category.

With his students, Scully opens the lesson with a scripture reading -- in this case, a passage from 1 Timothy about love and purity of heart. He sets the table for what follows by establishing a theme: "When people play games with love, they hurt themselves as well as others." He then allows a few moments for silent meditation.

Next, Scully provides his own thoughts on the theme. Usually, they're couched in terms of a story, always fictional but as true-to-life as possible. For Jewel's song, Scully devised a story about a youth minister in Minnesota. A teenage girl came to the minister, Scully said, to talk about her boyfriend. He seemed to be more concerned with himself than with her. The girl's question was How could she be sure that he loved her?

The minister helped the girl see that the boyfriend was playing a game -- "I, I, I," one of a handful of "standard games" that Scully thinks people play in relationships. When the boyfriend won't stop, the minister helps the girl through the process of letting him go, a terribly painful but, Scully says, necessary outcome.

Using a set of discussion questions, he leads the students to recognize that the singer is talking about a lover who valued his image over her needs.

Scully talks about what happens when a person masks the truth to another in a relationship. The other becomes a victim, he says, usually surrounded by pain. He asks the kids to hear the hurt in Jewel's voice, the anger and the sadness over a love betrayed.

“Young people have to learn to recognize game-playing and to cope with it,” Scully said. “It’s one key to their becoming psychologically healthy people.”

The approach is vintage Scully -- direct, practical and focused not on doctrinal formulae but on the realities of what it means to be a person of love in an imperfect world. It’s Christian theology, but presented in the context of real life.

Scully designs his Message of Rock materials to follow the format of his classroom presentations, with a scripture reading, theme, reflection and discussion questions for each song.

How much of this approach translates into the radio show? Scully says he will use a short version of his meditation to introduce the song. He delivers most of the reflection afterwards. But he also gets creative, sometimes using one song’s theme to anchor a whole show, finding corollaries to it in the other nine.

“I’m conscious of keeping it positive,” he said. “I’ve got some heavy things to say, but I want to do it with a smile.”

Bouncing signals

Despite Scully’s rural locale, his FM signals have bounced into some unlikely places. Among other things, The New Yorker is planning a profile on him. A freelance contributor to the magazine was driving across I-70 one Sunday morning, caught the show and liked what he heard.

Scully had come to the attention of his publisher in a similarly unplanned way. A director of religious education who worked with Scully at another parish assignment suggested that he develop a set of materials for teachers. So, in the late 1980s, he started writing discussion sheets for songs, with a relevant scripture citation, his own reflections and discussion questions. Scully asked the parish secretary to run off copies for whomever might be interested.

In 1990, Hi-Time got wind of Scully’s work and approached him for permission to publish it. He agreed and it evolved into an annual affair. Hi-Time now brings out a Message of Rock book each fall, and a Message of Film volume each spring. Designed for use either in Catholic schools or in parish-based religious education programs, the books are distributed nationally. The Fresno, Calif., diocese, for example, is an avid user of Scully’s materials.

A better approach

Of course, not everyone is ga-ga over Scully’s use of modern music and movies to reach young people. Some parents complain that Scully is exposing kids, albeit with the best of intentions, to material that’s unsuitable for them.

This happened recently when Scully used the movie “Prince of Tides” in both his class and his book. “I’ve got parents saying, ‘My kid’s 16 years old and a sophomore in high school and you want to show ‘Prince of Tides’ to

him?" "Scully said. He's not blind to the ironies of such opposition. "The kids have seen the film four times, of course, but I can't show it in school."

Scully ran into serious opposition when he used the film "Philadelphia." Many parents objected to its alleged sympathy for homosexuality, and Scully's publisher expressed reservations about putting it in his book for the same reason.

How does Scully respond? "You deal with them very kindly," he said. "You say, 'Thank you for sharing that with me. I do not share your point of view. You can't agree with me, and I can't agree with you. You have a legitimate point, and I see where you're coming from."

"But that is not the way adolescent psychologists would say to handle young people. You do not tell them, 'This is wrong -- don't do it,' because they're going to do it anyway. You either talk with them about or you don't -- and I feel the former is the better approach."

Scully wasn't always so mellow. In his younger, firebrand days, he stood taller in the saddle when he perceived a threat to his work.

"When I wrote my first religious education book, people took me to task and I had to go down to see the bishop and explain to him why I was doing it. I was confrontational -- the 'By damn, I'm right' kind of thing," he said.

"Now, I accept where everybody is. I'm radical in a nice sense. I'm not confronting anybody about it," Scully said.

"Being a pastor helps a lot, too," Scully says. It gives him a sort of moral authority, a way to soothe concerns by saying "this is okay" from the perspective of someone who's supposed to know.

None of this means Scully is entirely comfortable with the direction of music and film today, especially that intended for the youth market. He simply sees dialogue as a better response than anger.

"I wish I could do something about it," Scully said of the violence and amorality he perceives in the media. "But the Phyllis Schlafly approach is not the way to do it -- condemning and all that stuff. All that's going to do is get people to buy it," he said.

Scully sees the youth culture -- formed to a significant degree by the media -- as virtually a foreign territory.

"I use the idea of the missionary with our kids. I say the way that a youth minister should work is exactly the same way a missionary should work in Papua New Guinea [where the Capuchins have a long-standing mission]. You go into their culture, into what they're saying and you work with it ... try to figure out exactly where they're coming from."

"We have to go into their culture, what's making them think a certain way, and then -- literally -- Christianize it. Not churchize it, but Christianize it. Make it make sense to them, on their level, that Christianity is an answer."

What kids need

Does Scully like the job the church is doing today in youth ministry?

“No, by and large I do not. I like these great big things that happen, like World Youth Day in Paris, because it brings attention to youth and the fact that youth are important. But on the gut level -- down in the parish -- we're not spending the time with them. We're not giving them the necessities.”

For one thing, he said, too much religious education is doctrine-driven rather than based on how kids develop. “Let's do religious education that really does make sense,” he said. “Let's give them doctrine, let's give them prayers, the things they've got to have in front of them ... but let's give them the chance to think too, and the ability to say things like, ‘I don't understand why women can't be priests.’ Let's have the ability to talk about that.”

Still, no educational effort is likely to overcome completely what Scully sees as the biggest problem facing kids today -- a lack of involved, committed parents.

“They are not spending time with their kids, I don't care what anybody says,” Scully said. “You need two jobs to make it in the world today? No, you don't. And if you don't believe me, you gotta have less ... that's all. Have less in order to spend more time with your kids.”

Age has mellowed Scully both personally and theologically. Today Scully subscribes to a generally moderate line on most issues -- favoring the ordination of women, for example, and embracing power-sharing and expanded lay involvement in governance.

Does it bother him that church leaders haven't moved along with him? “I share a little of some people's pessimism” about the church, he says. “But what I focus on is that we're dealing with the Lord Jesus Christ, somebody that is not a church, not a church law, not a church position on homosexuality -- it's Jesus that you latch onto, not the rest of it.”

Scully remains hopeful that the church will grow and change in positive ways. “In the end, God's going to win. It's as simple as that,” he said.

It is that optimism that is perhaps the most attractive quality of Scully's message. It is not naiveté, but hope grounded in faith. On the air, in the classroom or in the pulpit -- and most especially with youth, the ministry closest to his heart -- Mike Scully is a relentless apostle of hope.

National Catholic Reporter, June 5, 1998

- [Top of page](#)