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Phil Donahue hosts his television show in New York on Jan. 27, 1993. Donahue, whose pioneering daytime talk show launched an indelible television genre, died Aug. 18. He was 88. (AP/Mark Lennihan, File)



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**Editor's note:** *This article has been updated with additional information and reaction.*

Daytime talk show host Phil Donahue tackled a wide range of topics on his show "Donahue," which ran in syndication for 29 years. He also took on the issue of clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic church long before major media outlets were reporting on it.

In a [1993 episode](#) he cautioned against "media hyperbole" but said people with more insight and who were more informed than him on this issue had described the abuse scandal as "the biggest crisis in the history of the largest church of Christendom — the holy Roman Catholic Church."

"That's not an overstatement, is it?" he asked on the show, nearly a decade before The Boston Globe's investigation into abuse cover-ups in the Boston Archdiocese erupted into a national controversy. National Catholic Reporter had been the [first publication to report on the abuse crisis](#) in the church in 1985 and continued to cover it throughout the 1990s.

Donahue, who was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom this May, died Aug. 18 at the age of 88. His talk show, which garnered him 20 Daytime Emmy awards, is said to have paved the way for other daytime talk show hosts, particularly Oprah Winfrey.

"If it weren't for Phil Donahue, there never would have been an Oprah show," Winfrey has said.

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In his two-part episode on clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, Donahue, who described himself as a lapsed Catholic, predicted that this crisis was "not going to be satisfactorily remedied" during the papacy of Pope John Paul II. He described the

crisis as "the Catholic Church's Watergate."

He featured [Barbara Blaine](#), the founder of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests; priest-sociologist Fr. [Andrew Greeley](#), who had just published a novel, *Fall From Grace*, that dealt with clergy sex abuse; and writer [Jason Berry](#), author of *Lead Us Not Into Temptation*, an account of an abuse scandal in Louisiana. Berry broke the abuse story for NCR in 1985 and wrote nearly all of the newspaper's coverage on the scandal for several years.

During the episode, Donahue elicited first-person accounts from Blaine and several other victims of clergy sex abuse. Some said they continued to be faithful to the church, or wanted to be, while others said they were through with Catholicism. Their accounts included elements all too common 30 years ago: equivocation by chancery officials, pushback from diocesan lawyers, and the fact that their abusers remained in the priesthood.

Donahue's show also addressed the HIV/AIDS epidemic and looked at LGBTQ issues. In 1976, he interviewed Jesuit Fr. [John McNeill](#), who had just written *The Church and the Homosexual*.

[Francis DeBernardo](#), executive director of New Ways Ministry, a national Catholic ministry for LGBTQ Catholics, said in an Aug. 20 statement that Donahue "often provocatively and courageously addressed the issues of sexual orientation, gender stereotypes, and gender identity."

Donahue, who was born in Cleveland, said in one episode that he "got a wonderful education" in the 12 years of Catholic schooling he received. "This is what this church can do," he added. Donahue followed that up with a bachelor's degree in business administration from the University of Notre Dame in Indiana.

He also met his first wife, Margaret Mary Cooney, while attending Notre Dame. They married in 1958, the year after he graduated from Notre Dame, and had five children.

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Donahue got his professional start at a Cleveland radio station, but soon afterward began the itinerant career path followed by many in the Fourth Estate. Following a

brief stint in Albuquerque, New Mexico, as a bank check sorter, he landed a job at a radio station in southern Michigan, then followed that up with a TV morning news anchor job in Dayton, Ohio.

Dayton was where the first incarnation of what was then known as "The Phil Donahue Show" got its start. The format — covering one topic for the entire hour — and the lack of frills common to TV talk shows of the day won him audiences and fame.

Donahue moved the show to Chicago in 1974; he and Margaret Mary divorced the following year. He laid part of the blame for the divorce on his workaholic tendencies.

But not even the City of Big Shoulders was big enough for Donahue and his show. With ratings, honors and syndicated stations — it would top out at around 200 — on the rise, "Donahue" moved to New York City in 1985.

By then, he had been wed for five years to Marlo Thomas, television's "That Girl" and still the primary TV pitchwoman for Memphis' St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, founded by her father, entertainer Danny Thomas.

Donahue, who described the Catholic church as sexist, racist and "unnecessarily destructive" told [The New York Times](#) in 2002 that he still saw himself "as a Catholic," adding: "I will always be a Catholic."

DeBernardo said Donahue's "advocacy for LGBTQ+ people, which had roots in his Catholic identity, is an important part of the church's conversation about sexuality and gender which continues."

He described Donahue as "an example of how lay people can influence the church oftentimes more powerfully than bishops, clergy, and religious. May he rest in peace, but may his legacy for justice and equality still carry on in lay people who continue to ask provocative and courageous questions."