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Blessed are the spin doctors

With Silas in New York, or having tea in London ... it is about getting the facts about Opus Dei

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ROME - In the run-up to the release of the film of The Da Vinci Code on May 19, the communications director for the U.K. branch of Opus Dei, a bundle of nervous energy even in calmer times, can hardly contain himself. "This is going to be the most exciting month of my life," Jack

Valero grins, as he passes me a bundle of some of the astonishing recent coverage: pages and pages from Time magazine, Le Figaro, The New York Times, Eve -- upbeat coverage getting inside the "real" Opus Dei, contrasted with the murderous conspirators in the Dan Brown megaseller.

The articles explain the difference between numeraries (celibate members) and supernumeraries (normally married); why they joined this Catholic organization of 86,000 worldwide dedicated to finding God in their daily work, and how, when you meet them, they are not sinister albino monks but prayerful insurance clerks of conservative temper.

You can't buy this sort of publicity. But should you ever find yourself cast as the central villains in a film based on a novel that has sold 40

million copies and is about to be one of the most widely watched films in history, you can, at least, enable it. When that novel takes as its premise the "revelation" that for centuries the Catholic Church has covered up the "truth" that Jesus Christ fathered a line of children through Mary Magdalene -- and, even more astonishingly, when people actually believe this stuff -- why not step out into the spotlight and let people see you as you really are? Opus Dei calls this "turning lemon into lemonade" and in the weeks before the film is released it is producing it in industrial quantities.

In New York, for example, Opus Dei offers the media the chance to meet Silas -- the murderer in The Da Vinci Code -- who turns out to be a Nigerian stockbroker in Brooklyn rejoicing in the name Silas Agbim.

He regularly appears on all the major networks, cheerfully discussing his life and vocation as a supernumerary. "If we agreed to all the media requests to meet the 'real' Silas," says Brian Finnerty of Opus Dei in New York, "he would have to give up his job and do this full time." Watching Valero and his colleagues rush between TV studios, it is hard to remember that this was once the Catholic Church's most furtive, defensive organization, obsessed with secrecy and taking an almost perverse pride in the media's hostility. Once the whipping boy of progressive Catholics, long associated with shadowy Spanish politics and Vatican intrigues, the face of Opus Dei is now Valero's: cheery, energetic, transparent, as open as its doors. You want to meet a supernumerary musician with twins in Notting Hill? No problem. Discuss mortification with a celibate numerary? Sure!

"It's like living in a goldfish bowl," he laughs. "People know everything about me: what time I get up, how much I pray, that I'm celibate, that I was born in Barcelona."

"There's nothing private about us any more." Opus Dei has even been happy to discuss the cilice -- the spiky leg-strap that its core members wear for an hour or so a day.

Valero describes it as "a traditional practice among monks and nuns which, like contemplative prayer and the divine office, can now be done by lay people too."

The architect of what has become known as "Operation Transparency" is Opus Dei's canny global communications director, Professor Juan Manuel Mora. An expert in communications at Opus Dei's Santa Croce University, near the Piazza Navona, he has in the space of 10

years completely overturned the organisation's shadowy subculture.

It would be nice to report that Mora is a stooped, cowed, puffy-eyed octogenarian monk with nervous tics and scars from overzealous mortification. In fact "Juanma," as everybody calls him, is, like most leading Opus Dei members, a genial middle-aged Spanish layman in a suit: passionate and charming.

"We are not taking this lying down," he tells me over lunch at the university. He has had no more luck than anyone else in securing a preview of the film, but the trailer -- which includes a flagellation scene of ferocious sadomasochistic violence -- gives a glimpse of what is to come. It is enough that the film be faithful to the novel, says Mora, to take the assault on the reputation of Opus Dei and the Catholic Church to a whole new level.

"With the novel, it was a problem of information. We could respond with books, Web sites and so on, countering falsehoods with truth. But with a film, you have a problem of imagination. People will associate Opus Dei with violence, the Catholic Church with deception. That's not something you can respond to with a book." When it learnt that Sony had bought the rights to the book, Opus Dei said nothing publicly but made contact with the corporation.

Polite letters were sent asking that the name of Opus Dei not be used, and pointing out that because the novel claimed to be based on historical truth, many people were likely not to be able to distinguish fact from fiction. Sony replied with vague letters giving no information about the movie but insisting they had no desire to offend anyone. Mora asked for an interview with Amy

Pascal, head of Sony's motion pictures division, but was ignored.

Then in December the film's director, Ron Howard, told Newsweek that the movie would closely follow the book, and implied that Opus Dei was in it. Mora swung into action.

Opus Dei would now say publicly, in a series of carefully timed open letters to Sony, what the corporation had not allowed it to put to them in private. The news this generated would generate public discussion about respect for faith and freedom of speech, and create yet more opportunities to meet the "real" Opus Dei, so that by the time the film opened the public would be better able to distinguish myth from fact.

In February, against the background of the row over the cartoons of the prophet Muhammad, Opus Dei called on Sony to make changes to the film "in these days in which everyone has

noted the painful consequences of intolerance." By making the changes, Sony would demonstrate that freedom of expression is compatible with respect for beliefs while also offering "a service to the cause of dialogue among cultures."

In the same tone of pained regret and elaborate politeness, Opus Dei in Tokyo wrote to Sony's shareholders and directors in April, appealing to Japanese corporate virtue and asking for a disclaimer in the film that would make clear that it was fiction. A disclaimer, the letter said, "would be a sign of respect towards the figure of Jesus Christ, the history of the Church, and the religious beliefs of viewers."

Sony has been rattled enough to hire PR companies specializing in "reputation management." Although it has not agreed to the disclaimer, the corporation has continually

stressed -- unlike Brown -- that it is a work of fiction. The movie is "a thriller, not a religious tract," according to a spokesman, Jim Kennedy. But belying that statement is a Web site Sony has created "to educate people" about theological issues raised by the film. They include essays and some basic information about the Bible, noting where the book "suggests" conclusions that differ from mainstream Christian belief -- thus placing the risible "theories" of the novel on a par with 2,000 years of theology.

But Opus Dei has stayed positive, patient and polite. The word "attack" is never used.

Sony's intentions are never presumed. There is no ping-pong counterresponse to the corporation's statements. There is barely indignation, let alone anger, in the

letters and statements; no calls for boycotts or protests or threats to sue. There is none of the arrogance and defensiveness typical of religious groups deploring offensive books or films.

Contrast this approach with the speech given in Rome last week by Mgr. Angelo Amato, the number two at the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

He called on Catholics to boycott the film and organize protests. If "such lies and errors had been directed at the Koran or the Holocaust, they would have justly provoked a world uprising," Amato said. "Instead, if they are directed against the Church and Christians, they remain unpunished." You hear this sentiment often on the lips of Christians: of course, if we were Muslims they would never dare. . . . Not only does this cheer on violence,

but it fails to recognize that the anger of the indignant victim quickly moves sympathy away from the victim -- as the popular abhorrence of the Muslim protests showed.

This is what Mora has grasped. "Sony is King Kong," he says. "I want to be cast as the blonde girl. If I'm the policeman who fires on King Kong, then sympathy will shift from the blonde girl to the beast." The brilliance of Opus Dei's strategy is that it realizes the bind that Christians in the contemporary West are in. Muslims and Jews deserve respect for their beliefs because they are minorities, while Christians -- in spite of all the facts to the contrary -- are seen as a hegemonic body which it is therefore legitimate to denigrate. The presupposition of The Da Vinci Code is that the Church is powerful, secretive, misogynistic and violent, acting through history like a big, bad corporation.

Ironically, this prejudice has been bolstered by secularization: the less contact people have with churches and Christians, the more inclined they are to believe damaging nonsense about them.

The novel may have its qualities as a page-turner. But only that combination of credulity and prejudice in Western culture can explain why *The Da Vinci Code* has become the biggest-selling book after the Bible. That is why the real victim here is the Church. How can it contest a bestselling calumny which purports to be fact -- or protect its good name against a reputation-smashing Hollywood film? The answer is given by Opus Dei. The Church's best response is to switch public sympathy to where the facts demand it be directed. It can do this only by inviting people to come in and see the truth for themselves. If it tries to play the victim's power game

-- angry, defensive, proud, placard-waving, violent -- sympathy will switch back from the blonde to the beast.

That is why Mora's strategy is paying dividends. Before *The Da Vinci Code* the peak of interest in its U.S. Web site was 200,000 in 2002 -- the year of the canonization of the founder, Josemaria Escriva. Last year it was 2.5 million -- on top of a rash of documentaries, news slots and magazine profiles. A number of Opus Dei's newest members say they first heard of the organization through *The Da Vinci Code*. Opus Dei's strategy has not stopped the film, and it won't stop millions watching it and believing it. But turning lemons into lemonade has meant, at least, that millions more will know that it is nonsense -- and unfair on Christians because of Dan Brown's claim to a basis in fact. And in some there will have been the kind of conversion

which a group of American tourists on a "Da Vinci Code pilgrimage" underwent last year. Seeing them gawping outside Netherhall House, Opus Dei's student residence in north London, Valero invited them in for tea, introduced them to his numerary colleagues, and sat them down to his Powerpoint slides.

At the end of the visit the tourists were incensed. "You guys are so nice," they said.

"That Dan Brown -- he's a liar. We don't trust nothing in that book now. You should sue the sucker." Tempting, but that would be to play the power game. And anyway, they're having too much fun.

"It's going to be amaaaazing," beams Valero. "Then it'll die down, and we'll be happy to be the best-known group in the Catholic Church."

See The Holy Grail of Tourism WP12
and WP13

Austen Ivereigh // The
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