

Dan Brown has done Opus Dei a favour

"When life hands you a lemon, make lemonade"

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The grotesque caricature of Opus Dei in the bafflingly successful novel *The Da Vinci Code* prompted me to seek the advice of a Hollywood media guru about what our Opus Dei David could do to counteract the seemingly unstoppable Da Vinci Code Goliath.

The oracle pondered the situation, then pronounced: "When life hands

you a lemon, make lemonade." He continued: "One thing's certain: No amount of money could have purchased the name recognition that [Dan] Brown's book has provided. Now that you have the world's attention, it's time to make lemonade: Tell the world what Opus Dei really is."

During my final year of high school in 1970, I met Josemaria Escriva, the Spanish priest who founded Opus Dei in 1928. I had devoured his book of spiritual considerations, *The Way*. Father Escriva's spirituality infused my day-to-day student life with unexpected transcendence. You can imagine the emotion that hundreds of thousands of people -- myself included -- felt two years ago when Pope John Paul II declared Josemaria a saint.

(By the way, Mr. Brown's depiction of Opus Dei as a sect is absurd. Popes

don't canonize founders of cults or sects. Never have, never will.)

A favourite 10-second definition of Opus Dei is "personal trainer for the soul." We show people how to put all the pieces of their lives together -- faith, work, family life -- so that they form an integrated whole. Our activities range from one-on-one spiritual coaching and classes in a downtown restaurant on business ethics, to weekend spiritual retreats and monthly "evenings of recollection." Whatever it takes to show folks how to bring God into their everyday lives and give their existence transcendence.

The spirituality is distinctly lay, aimed at transforming the daily lives of men and women in the mainstream of life. Work and family are two huge components of life. At some point, most people wonder how to bring God into all those activities.

It's a question that cries out for an answer. It is downright liberating to realize God is intensely interested in all that we do, which translates into the need to act accordingly.

About 98 per cent of Opus Dei's 86,000 members are lay men and women, with a handful of priests (1,900) rounding out the membership. No monks (albino or otherwise), although we revere the monastic tradition. In Canada, total membership numbers roughly 600 people, and we have centres in Montreal (where the national headquarters are located), Toronto, Ottawa, Quebec City and Vancouver. There are also regular activities in Calgary, Edmonton, London and Kingston.

As I dutifully made my way through *The Da Vinci Code*, "Give me a break!" must have come to my lips a dozen times per page. There are far too

many errors to refute in this brief space. Dozens of books have already been published that make mincemeat of Mr. Brown's alleged "research."

His grotesque parody of corporal mortification, for example, is worthy of *Monty Python*. A spirit of sacrifice has been a staple of Christian spirituality since the time of Christ. Nearly every canonized saint right up to our day has practised it. Ironically, *The Da Vinci Code* might end up reintroducing millions of readers to the vocabulary of generous self-giving, indispensable for a balanced and happy life.

Elitism is a charge that pops up now and then. Some years ago, a banker who was visiting a European capital hailed a taxi. He was surprised to see a photo of Opus Dei's founder in the visor, and commented that he had always heard that Opus Dei was just

for bankers. The taxi driver smiled and replied, "That's odd, when I first met Opus Dei I thought it was just for cabbies!"

Father Escriva insisted tirelessly on the need for "unity of life." That concept means living a life of integrity as the fruit of doing everything in God's presence. A student, journalist, carpenter, nurse, even a novelist, would likely work with more love and more integrity if they realized God really cares about the quality of the finished product. But one must learn how to put one's faith into practise, and that is precisely what Opus Dei is about. It makes no sense to go about one's professional life equipped with a vague, inadequate formation in morality that halted in secondary school.

Oddly enough, Mr. Brown has unwittingly done Opus Dei a favour.

Never has there been so much interest in finding out what we really are and do. In his lifetime, Father Escriva experienced every form of calumny imaginable, but without ever losing his peace.

In his book *Furrow*, he observes: "The evil or flippant word of only one man can create a climate of opinion, and even make it fashionable to speak badly about somebody. Then that thin mist of slander rises from below, reaches a high level and perhaps condenses into black clouds. But when the man persecuted in this way is a soul of God, the clouds shower down a beneficial rain, come what may; and the Lord ensures that he is exalted by the very means with which they tried to humiliate or defame him."

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