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Opus Dei brings holiness to your work

Headline-grabbing Catholic organization not guilty of charges in Da Vinci Code

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Jason West encourages everyone to do just what the movie version of the Da Vinci Code wants: Seek the truth.

And he will be more than happy to assist.

The movie and the book call 2,000 years of Christian teaching a hoax and suggest Opus Dei is a darkling men's club that includes the likes of the murderous albino monk Silas.

But in West's view, the real truth is that taught by Jesus Christ and lived out by those who faithfully follow his life and teachings, including the members of Opus Dei.

He should know. He is a member of Opus Dei.

Opus Dei response

"The Catholic reaction to the Da Vinci Code has been to have a positive response rather than simply be negative and critical," said West, 36, a philosophy professor at Newman Theological College. He's read the book, but has not yet seen the movie.

West converted to Catholicism soon after he met his future wife

Christine. They now have four children.

The family moved from Waterloo two years ago before West began teaching at Newman. Photos of them on a recent holiday in B.C. are pinned to his office wall. They look like any other happy, young family. Nothing sinister there.

"There is no real evidence to claim Jesus was a father and that his death was faked. That's pretty clear," he said. "Presenting the Church as an institution that is hiding the truth in order to promote its own power is inaccurate and harmful by sowing a culture of suspicion."

West said the issue is important to the Church because the book has caught the public's attention and seems to be influencing people's ideas about Christian history.

"Not so much in terms of the claims in the book of Mary Magdalene having Christ's children, but fostering an attitude that doesn't see all of the wonderful things the Church is doing and has done."

West stressed that his comments were his own views and are not meant to represent Opus Dei or Newman College.

Opus Dei - Latin for God's work - is an international religious organization within the Roman Catholic Church. Its more than 87,000 members are both laity and priests. Until 1930, membership was exclusively male. Male and female activities are separate.

It was founded in 1928 by Spanish priest Josemaria Escriva, who was canonized a saint in 2002. Bishop Javier Echevarria Rodriguez of Spain is the current head of the organization.

Opus Dei has 19 centres in Canada. They hold prayer meetings or workshops. No centres are in Alberta. Members also open their homes for gatherings.

West joined Opus Dei eight years ago in Ontario to deepen his commitment to Christ after he began attending activities while in university.

Members must be Catholic, at least 18 years old and willing to make a lifelong commitment.

There are three types of members: West is a "supernumerary" - married members who comprise some 70 per cent of the organization.

A "numerary" commits to celibacy but not a vocation to priesthood.

And "numerary assistants" are usually women who serve domestically fulltime within Opus Dei centres.

Faith path

"I became interested in Catholicism initially through my studies in philosophy when I started to read St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas," he said.

"It was furthered through our marriage and Christine's family. It opened my eyes to how richer life could be. There was so much more and that excited me."

Several evenings of recollection helped West in his spiritual direction. He began to have a clearer vision of his vocation.

"It was God's will for me that I was going to become Catholic and put him in the centre of my life. It took a couple of years before I came to that realization."

West likes to spend his free time with his family, whether camping or just

kicking a soccer ball in their backyard.

Christine stays home caring for the children. When time allows, she does volunteer work at St. Andrew's Parish.

West is vice president of the Canadian Society of Christian Philosophers. He is also a board member of the WCR.

"The spirit of Opus Dei is to become holy through your ordinary work and through what work you are already doing in family life. It's different in the sense that you don't change your state of life by doing new things.

"What you do is turn those things you were already doing into prayer and service. In this sense, a member of Opus Dei is the same as any other Catholic. We just try to live with a particular spirit."

Membership is diverse, including janitors to company CEOs. What they have in common is their desire for spirituality, fellowship and a commitment to excellence in their work.

West says every member contributes money to the organization. Typically numeraries give whatever they do not need beyond living expenses.

"The value of our work is not the position we hold, but the love with which we do it," West said. "In terms of our society, a person might have an insignificant job, but if he is doing it with a great love for God, then he provides a service that helps to promote the common good of that community. Obviously, he can be much holier than an executive who fakes the books."

Local scene

There are only a handful of members in Western Canada who practise a life of attending daily Mass and praying the rosary.

A priest visits Alberta from Vancouver once a month for an evening of recollection and meditation.

West says the order in his life comes from prayer.

"Being a member of Opus Dei provides me with a balance that keeps various responsibilities in their proper priorities," he said. "It is important to not always do what we want, but to do what God wants us to do. It forces me to be much more effective in the things I do."

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