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Opus Dei's Open Code

When Dan Brown hands you a lemon, make lemonade

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I'm bouncing down Côte-des-Neiges Road in a little red car, sitting shotgun. Behind the wheel sits a member of the infamous religious order, Opus Dei, the sect behind a massive global conspiracy in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. But my driver, Isabelle Saint-Maurice, is so unlike the book's villainous Opus Dei

monk that I'm not concerned. In fact, I'm enjoying the ride.

Spotting a parking space on the other side of the street, Saint-Maurice pulls an unexpected U-turn. "Watch out!" she laughs. "I'm a bit of a cowboy." So begins my introduction to Opus Dei in Montreal.

With her springy red curls, funky earrings and gold ballet flats, Saint-Maurice is about as far from The Da Vinci Code's cowl-wearing albino as one can get. And yet the charismatic fifty-one-year-old is a devout Opus Dei "numerary" who's been celibate for over thirty-five years. She lives in an Opus Dei residence in Rosemont and has devoted her life to the group she calls her "family."

Formed in Spain in 1928, this ultraconservative Catholic group has its Canadian roots in Montreal. Opus Dei has been here for almost fifty years but has only about 600

Canadian members (more than a third of them in Quebec). Such a puny headcount would make orchestrating a global conspiracy more than a little difficult, as Saint-Maurice is quick to point out. “When people ask me if we’re dangerous and influential, I say, ‘Please, teach me how!’”

Nevertheless, with *The Da Vinci Code* film set for release on May 19, the media’s spotlight is shining squarely on this once-obscure sect. A former journalist and music teacher, Saint-Maurice is currently Opus Dei’s Canadian press office director. The flurry of attention has been keeping her more than a little busy.

We take a table at a local coffee shop. I ask my companion what she thinks of Dan Brown’s portrayal of Opus Dei in his book. She scoffs. “At least he spelled ‘Opus Dei’ right,” she says. “But you know that little saying—

sometimes life hands you a lemon, so you make lemonade.”

Opus Dei's lemonade stand is open for business. As Da Vinci Code-mania spreads across North America, the public has developed an appetite for everything and anything Opus Dei. The media knows it and Opus Dei knows it too; the two have formed an alliance of sorts. The press gets access to the group and Opus Dei gets to show the world that it has nothing to hide.

It seems to be working. Just last month, the group's Montreal office sent out a press release to let local media know that they were taking calls. In the feeding frenzy that resulted, Saint-Maurice coordinated thirty interviews in one day. And that's just the Montreal office—Opus Dei has press people at work from Quebec City to Vancouver. When she tells me this, I'm flabbergasted, but

the effervescent woman just laughs it off. “I like the action,” she says.

When covering Opus Dei, the media’s favourite topic seems to be how very normal its members are. For the most part, journalists point out, these people lead average, everyday lives with just a few small quirks here and there (self-flagellation comes to mind). For their part, Opus Dei members have been willing to answer even the most personal of questions and the media has taken full advantage, shining a light into some of the sect’s most shadowy corners. All this is to help normalize a group that was once considered controversial.

“Because of this movie, we are all in the spotlight,” Saint-Maurice says. “Not everyone is comfortable with the attention. Some aspects of our faith are very intimate and personal, and now it’s all in the open for

everyone to see.” Not just to see, but to ogle from the anonymous darkness of a movie theatre, preferably while munching popcorn. Saint-Maurice is talking about corporal mortification.

We’ve all seen the movie trailers—they show the Opus Dei villain wildly flailing himself with a whip as thick as my forearm. In his book, Brown provides gory description of the cilice, a metal band worn around the thigh of some Opus Dei members. His monk traipses around town chanting, “Pain is good!” If we’re to believe Dan Brown, Opus Dei is quite the bunch of bad-asses.

Opus Dei members have been quick to point out that, in reality, their practices aren’t nearly so extreme. Saint-Maurice goes through it with me now. She wears her cilice for about two hours a day, when she gets home from work. “It’s just

uncomfortable, that's it," she assures me. "It's like sitting in one of those car seats made of tiny wood balls. You know, like taxi drivers have."

According to Saint-Maurice, the whip favoured by Opus Dei numeraries is really nothing like the fat cat o' nine tails that the monk uses in the movie trailers. The 'discipline,' as it's called, is made up of a few thin ropes bound together at one end. It's about forty centimeters long and is used once a week, while praying.

"We do it to wake up our bodies," Saint-Maurice explains. "It's a way to remember Jesus. He suffered a lot for us. But there's no way it could leave a mark."

Even if self-flagellation isn't everyone's cup of tea, The Da Vinci Code, and the resulting media blitz around Opus Dei, has got more people wanting to join the controversial group than ever

before. “I wouldn’t thank Dan Brown,” Saint-Maurice says. “But it has done something positive for us. People are more curious about religion today because of his book. It’s made our faith stronger.”

Bridget Bagshaw, a married member of Opus Dei, tends to agree. “We really couldn’t have paid for all this publicity,” she says. Bagshaw and her husband, Karl Santaguida, have me over to their Pointe-Claire home on a sunny Sunday afternoon. Their house looks like a lived-in ski lodge. They have five young kids and a sixth on the way. They seem like the sort of couple I’d like to kick back and have a beer with. Like Saint-Maurice, these are poster people for a happy, healthy Opus Dei.

Despite all the recent publicity surrounding the sect, the neighbours apparently haven’t been snooping around the Santaguidas’ yard for

albino monks, ancient paintings or other signs of global conspiracy. “Our religion is a private thing,”

Santaguida explains. “I don’t think people even realize we’re involved with Opus Dei. We’re happy to talk about it, but it’s not like we drive around with a bumper sticker that says, ‘HONK IF YOU’RE IN OPUS DEI!’”

Their religion may be private but that doesn’t mean this couple resents the recent attention. “The coverage I’ve seen so far has been fair and balanced, for the most part,”

Santaguida says. “And if it means that more people hear a vocation to Opus Dei then that’s a good thing.”

I ask if they’ve read *The Da Vinci Code*. “We’re reading it now,” says Santaguida with a big smile. “It’s hard to read it with a straight face—it’s so silly.” Bagshaw laughs.

Whatever they may think of Dan Brown's writing abilities, this couple is fully aware that some of the glamour attached to his bestseller has rubbed off onto Opus Dei.

"The Da Vinci Code hasn't been a bad thing for us," Bagshaw points out. "More people are interested in Opus Dei than ever before."

As for Saint-Maurice, she'll be joining most of Montreal in front of the big screen to see The Da Vinci Code movie soon. But her expectations aren't high. "In two years, who will speak of The Da Vinci Code?" she asks. "It will be forgotten. Opus Dei will outlive it by many, many years."

Turning The Da Vinci Code's lemons into lemonade may be Opus Dei's most successful conspiracy yet.

Kate Lunau // Maisonneuve -
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