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Opus Dei and Corporal Mortification

The Da Vinci Code has drawn attention to the Catholic custom of corporal mortification. Rev. Michael Barrett, a priest of Opus Dei, answers questions.

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Is The Da Vinci Code's portayal of corporal mortification accurate?

The Da Vinci Code's bloody depictions of mortification are grotesque exaggerations that have nothing to

do with reality. Obviously the movie makers were looking for shock value, and the real use of the cilice and discipline would have been too tame. In reality, they cause a fairly low level of discomfort comparable to fasting. There is no blood, no injury, nothing to harm a person's health, nothing traumatic. If it caused any harm, the Church would not allow it.

Do members of Opus Dei use the cilice?

Some of the celibate members of Opus Dei use the cilice. It's a small, light, metal chain with little prongs worn around the thigh. The cilice is uncomfortable--it's supposed to be--but it does not in any way hinder one's normal activities and there's absolutely no *Da Vinci Code* gore.

And what about the disciplines?

The same as the cilice. Some celibate members use them generally once a

week for a minute or two. Again, no blood, no harm, just some short-term discomfort. Far from the two-fisted flogging of *The Da Vinci Code's* crazed monk, the real disciplines are made of woven cotton string and weigh less than two ounces. When members or former members see the monk go at it in the movie, they just burst out laughing, it's so nutty.

Did Opus Dei invent the cilice and the discipline?

Not at all. The cilice and the disciplines, along with fasting and other bodily penances, have been used in the Catholic Church for centuries. Many of the best known and most beloved saints like St. Francis Assisi, St. Ignatius Loyola and St. Therese of Lisieux used them. In the Twentieth century, people like Saint Padre Pio and Blessed Mother Teresa and Pope Paul VI also used them. Bodily penances such as

fasting and abstinence from meat are still mandated by the Church for all Catholics on some days of Lent.

Why do they do these mortifications?

Penance and mortification are a small but essential part of the Christian life. Jesus Christ himself fasted for forty days to prepare for his public ministry. Mortification helps us resist our natural drive toward personal comfort which so often prevents us from answering the Christian call to love God and serve others for love of God. Also, this voluntarily accepted discomfort is a way of joining oneself to Jesus Christ and the sufferings he voluntarily accepted in order to redeem us from sin. *The Da Vinci Code's* masochist monk, who loves pain for its own sake, has nothing to do with real Christian mortification.

How important is mortification for members of Opus Dei?

Despite *The Da Vinci Code's* morbid attention to mortification, for real members of Opus Dei it plays a secondary role. The primary thing for any Catholic is love of God and neighbor. Penance and mortification aim to reduce our self-centeredness and so to help us to grow in love for God and neighbor. In keeping with its spirit of integrating faith with secular life, Opus Dei emphasizes small rather than great sacrifices, like sticking at your work when tired, being punctual, passing up a small pleasure in food or drink, or not complaining.

See also a video with Fr. John Wauck

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