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Three years with the Da Vinci Code

How has the Office of Information of Opus Dei responded to The Da Vinci Code? We offer here the text of a talk given to a group of professional journalists explaining the public relations plan begun three years ago.

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Introduction (*)

In the New York communications office of Opus Dei, we first learned

about *The Da Vinci Code* only weeks before the novel's publication, through an article in *Publishers Weekly*. Brian Finnerty recalls alerting a colleague about the novel's extravagant premise: the Church has always kept secret the existence of a line of descendents of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene, and an Opus Dei albino monk runs around killing people in a search for the Holy Grail. The colleague's response was "Brian, don't worry, the novel sounds so silly that nobody will ever buy it."

That prediction, of course, did not turn out to be true. Since its publication in 2003 by Doubleday, *The Da Vinci Code* has become one of the best-selling works of all time with its many million of copies sold. An undoubted hit in terms of sales, although accompanied by negative literary criticism.

On 17 May the film will be launched in Cannes. Produced by and marketed by Sony Pictures, it is being promoted with one of the biggest marketing budgets in the history of the silver screen: 40 million dollars just for the USA market, according to the “Wall Street Journal”. In the cover story that “Newsweek” devoted to the end of 2005, it was presented as *the* event of the year 2006.

Perhaps the fundamental characteristic of *The Da Vinci Code* is that it mixes fact and fiction in a misleading manner. The novel begins with a “Fact” page that makes the false claim that “All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.” Christianity and the Catholic Church are falsely portrayed as a hoax invented by the fourth-century Roman emperor Constantine. The novel also presents a bizarre caricature of the Catholic

Church institution Opus Dei, complete with the character of Silas, the murderous albino monk. However, as Amy Welborn has written, in reality “*The Da Vinci Code* is a mess, a riot of laughable errors and serious misstatements”.

The Da Vinci Code phenomenon poses questions that go beyond the specific case, and which it would be interesting to discuss in this seminar. What responsibilities does the entertainment industry have to be sensitive and fair in the portrayal of different religious, ethnic and social groups? And how can offended parties respond, defending their own rights, while respecting freedom of expression and the freedom of the market-place?

Catholics and other Christians have expressed their concerns about the novel in numerous different ways. Some examples among many:

Especially significant was the launching of the “Jesus Decoded” website, sponsored by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, together with a documentary of the same name. Other bishops’ conferences have also launched clear responses to the book, e.g. Mexico, Poland and Brazil.

A coalition of Catholics in the U.S. has formed an initiative called “DaVinci Outreach” (www.davincioutreach.com) which is also the source for the “The Da Vinci Deception”, a concise but excellent Q&A book.

The DVC has also been the occasion for other serious books, such as Amy Welborn's “De-Coding Da Vinci”, and “The Da Vinci Hoax” by Carl Olson. The same could be said of documentaries like, for example, “Solving the 2000 Year Old Mystery” by Grizzly Adams Productions. Many

books and essays have been published in other countries.

At the appropriate time it would be interesting to study all these responses from the communications point of view. Here is a summary of the work of the Information Offices of Opus Dei, above all in Rome and New York.

Communications Plan Chronology

1. The novel:

We found the novel “in our hands” in early 2003, already published, without having heard before of the writer Dan Brown. Our first response was to ignore the book to the extent possible, responding to inquiries, but trying to avoid giving additional attention to it by over-reacting.

In September 2003, after receiving numerous requests for information, we posted a statement at the website www.opusdei.org , stressing that the

DVC is a fictional work and not a reliable source. There we also collected other resource material, which was useful for answering the many questions we were receiving.

From the beginning our attitude was to be helpful and open in providing information about Opus Dei. It was in this phase, for instance, that a book dedicated entirely to Opus Dei was started, by Vatican expert John L. Allen.

2. The film:

The film was a future event, which we learned about when it was publicized that Sony Pictures had bought the rights of the novel.

Therefore we could be proactive; we did not wish to wait passively, and we decided to take the initiative. In this more proactive period we can distinguish two phases:

Phase A (2004-2005): In this phase we aimed to avoid all forms of polemics, because as is well known in Hollywood, controversy generates box office sales. We attempted a direct dialogue with Sony, sending them three letters. In the first, in January 2004, the U.S. Vicar of Opus Dei, Fr. Tom Bohlin, noted with regret the unfair treatment of the Catholic Church, and requested that the name of Opus Dei not be used. We also requested an interview with Amy Pascal, the head of Sony's motion pictures division. Later in 2004 Ms. Pascal replied to us in a letter with polite but vague assurances. We were never given a meeting with her, nor with the people working on the movie. Sony never provided us with information about the movie. It was only through the media that we learned that Sony planned to go ahead with their false and bizarre portrayal of the Catholic Church and Opus Dei.

Phase B (2006): This phase, which we are in now, began on 26 December 2005, with a declaration by Ron Howard in Newsweek in which he affirmed the complete faithfulness of the film to the book, and explicitly said that Opus Dei would be part of the movie. This information implied a new scenario. From this moment we would have to present our point of view to the opinion of the general public. Therefore on 10 January 2006 communications staff for Opus Dei met in Rome, including people from the information offices of New York, London, Paris, Madrid, Cologne, Lagos and Montreal. In this meeting they studied the many suggestions received, from journalists, communications professionals, and other colleagues. The plan would be coordinated by the Department of Communication in Rome, after being approved by the responsible authorities. At this meeting we described our strategy as “converting

lemons into lemonade”, as Time Magazine has reported.

We now go on to describe the plan.

Diagnosis

1. During the meeting in Rome, the essential characteristics of the situation were identified, from the communications point of view:

a. Both products affected mainly Christians, more specifically Catholics, and only secondarily Opus Dei.

b. They are both negative products for Christians. They could be considered a case of a communications crisis (although a particular kind of crisis).

c. The novel and the film are phenomena of the world of communication, in the field of

fiction, with a strong element of marketing.

d. At the time of the diagnosis, the book and the film were already phenomena on the global stage, not merely the American one.

2. Therefore the work program should be fitted to these characteristics: to implement a communications plan that would be worldwide in its scope, Christian in its content and positive in its tone, in order to neutralise the negative effects. Of the three possibilities (the way of silence, the way of the Law, the way of communication) the third was chosen. The response should always be well-mannered and friendly. Therefore style and language were not secondary matters.

Objectives

There were two principle objectives of the plan:

1. To take advantage of the opportunity to spread information about the reality of Jesus Christ and of the Church, and in this context of Opus Dei. Making lemonade would mean taking advantage of the “teaching moment”, to promote the reading of reliable sources such as the Gospels. Together with this, there was to be an information effort to show that the real Opus Dei had nothing in common with the Opus Dei presented in the book: no monks, no murders, no masochism, no misogyny, but ordinary Catholics, who with all their virtues and defects, try to live out their faith in the secular world or, as Pope John Paul II put it, try “to live the Gospel in the world.”

2. To ask Sony respectfully and the team making the movie, to avoid

giving offense to Christians, by a free decision, not through pressure or threats. To tell them in public what it had not been possible to say in private. To remind them that that it is possible to uphold freedom of expression at the same time as showing respect. Nobody would utter words of censure or make threats. Sony Pictures would have an opportunity make a contribution to harmony, with a gesture of respect towards religious beliefs.

Means

How have we been trying to communicate these objectives? How have we been working to transmit our point of view?

1. In the first place, we have tried to **promote a kind of “response before its time”** . In other words, instead of avoiding the crisis we have tried to bring it forward, to anticipate it. With these aims in

mind, the declarations of our office have attracted the attention of the media. The three most notable declarations have been the following:

a) 12 January 2006: The interview of Marc Carroggio with the international “Zenit New's Agency”. This interview was the first official answer to Ron Howard’s words published in “Newsweek”, saying that the film would be completely faithful to the book. Zenit’s interview dealt with the key points: the offensive character of this story for Christians, the importance of respect for beliefs, and the request for a gesture of respect. Many international news agencies (and after that many other media) reproduced parts of that interview. The New York Times referred to it on 7 February 2006.

b) 14 February 2006: Perhaps the most widely publicized action

directly promoted by ourselves was the statement released on 14 February, to answer many questions that we were receiving about our position on the Da Vinci Code film. The statement was also a response to Sony Pictures, who, as reported in the New York Times of 9 February, had announced the launch of another website controlled by them, *www.davincichallenge.com* as a venue for Christians to express their views. In a statement we reminded Sony that, while there was time, it was not sufficient to give the offended party an opportunity to defend itself, rather than avoiding the offence itself. We refused to join this “mediated” dialogue on their sponsored website, and instead continued the dialogue on our own terms.

c) 6 April 2006: The Communications Office of Opus Dei in Tokyo wrote a letter to the officials of Sony

Corporation in Japan. The Office offered to give information about the real Opus Dei, and petitioned the directors of Sony about the possibility of including a disclaimer in the soon-to-be-released film to clarify that it is a work of fantasy and that any similarity with reality is purely coincidental. This action, says the letter “would be a gesture of respect toward the figure of Jesus, to the history of the Church and to the religious beliefs of viewers.” One week later, the letter was put on the official website in Japanese, and from there it was picked up by news agencies worldwide.

The aim of this “anticipated response” was that when the movie arrived everyone should recognize it as a “comedy of errors” as far as Christianity is concerned. To indicate the errors (at times grotesque) without lacking respect for the author, the director of the film, or

any of the actors or producers. The public declarations showed the existence of an unresolved problem, and therefore found a place in the news.

2. A second point has been **to treat the media as an ally**, to give priority to demand, and generate a worldwide dialogue in public. The launching of a film is normally preceded by a marketing campaign, which in this case reached enormous proportions. The producer communicates through these means: classical publicity, such as street hoardings, television advertisements; new forms of marketing, through mobile phones and the internet. Huge investments, which are impossible to combat. Therefore the Information Office decided to respond to marketing (by Sony) with information: with open conversations with journalists, to rebut the heavily cosmeticised

marketing messages, which hide the offensive aspects of the movie; to respond with imagination to the financial investment.

Giving priority to demand means responding to all requests from journalists. Taking this decision was easy, as it has been the usual practice of the Office. But the numbers of requests from the media have been very high, and also their reach, e.g. the *New York Times* , *Associated Press* , *Time Magazine* , *Chicago Tribune* ; broadcasters such as *Channel 4 (UK)* , *The History Channel* : programs such as *Good Morning America* and the *Today Show* . When we left New York to be present at this seminar, we were dealing with forty requests simultaneously. It has been necessary to reinforce the offices in New York and Rome, but in general we have worked with our normal resources.

3. Another important means in this period has been to make available lots of information in order to **show the real Opus Dei** . Specifically:

a) To promote more “news”. As well as the three statements already mentioned, in recent months we have put greater effort into the diffusion of different news items to help show the real Church, the real Opus Dei. It seemed to us that this was a service to help those who were preparing a story or report about the Church and Opus Dei in the “Da Vinci Code era”.

We have been trying to give more visibility to some activities that might pass unobserved at other times but that now, when everyone is writing stories about the “real Opus Dei”, appear more attractive. For instance, “Harambee 2002”, a charity started at the time of the canonization of Saint Josemaria Escriva, to foster

local health and educational projects in sub-Saharan Africa (www.harambee2002.org).

Together with this, many ordinary activities have been converted into “news” in this period; the re-design of our website, the appearance of a blog by Fr John Wauck about Opus Dei and the Da Vinci Code (www.davincicode-opusdei.com), the launch in New York of a new edition of “The Way”, a collection of points for personal meditation on Christian life written by Josemaría Escrivá in 1934, by Doubleday, which will be distributed to all bookshops in America.

Another news item has been the documentary produced by the Saint Josemaria Institute and the Cresta Group (Chicago) entitled “Passionately Loving the World”. This 28 minutes movie shows Americans from around the country

whose lives have been transformed by the spirituality of St. Josemaría Escrivá: a Los Angeles fire-fighter, a college student, an entrepreneur, and a family on a farm, among others.

After the premier of the documentary in New York, hundreds of news items appeared in the American media talking about the “other movie”. The video itself was news, and excerpts from it were shown on ABC, CNN and other north American stations.

b) Offering contacts, people, faces. In these times of high demand, we consider it fundamental that journalists have been able to speak with hundreds of contacts and witnesses.

The “media system” always needs an authorized voice. It has been possible to count on the full availability of institutional sources (authorities of the Prelature), and on many other

people (students, older people, members of Opus Dei and friends) who have helped by recounting “their story”.

Also, through the website we have been offering the possibility to arrange presentations on Opus Dei in parishes, associations, clubs, etc. A text on the site says: “Do you need someone to speak about Opus Dei for a panel or other event about The Da Vinci Code? Contact at press@opusdei.org.”

c) Discovering stories. Every news item has its own narrative. In this sense journalists need little stories that they can put into their narration. Working together, many little stories have occurred to us that have been useful to the media professionals. Two examples:

When the media started to increase their interest in the real Opus Dei, it turned out that there was a real

person named Silas in Opus Dei. Silas Agbim is not a murderous albino monk, but a stockbroker from Biafra (Nigeria) who lives in Brooklyn with his wife Ngozi. A picture of the real Silas appeared in the New York Times on 7 February, and since then he has been interviewed by many other media outlets such as Time Magazine, CNN, CBS, ABC, and international media.

Another example. Last 12th of February we installed a little box offering literature at the entrance of our headquarters in Manhattan, called Murray Hill Place, with the inscription: “For fans of The Da Vinci Code: If you are interested in the ‘real’ Opus Dei, take one”. The box cost \$10 but pictures of it have been reproduced in more than 100 newspapers and filmed by film crews from around the world. A “low-cost” information resource.

The Murray Hill Place building mentioned in the novel as the “worldwide headquarters of Opus Dei” has been converted into an essential part of many narratives in which the journalists joke that they have not found the “torture chambers” mentioned in the book. Dozens of journalists have been able to visit the “real Murray Hill Place”, a multi-purpose facility located in Manhattan at the corner of Lexington Avenue and 34th Street. It contains the offices of the Regional Vicar of the United States, a 30 room conference center, a center with activities for university students and young professionals (Schuyler Hall), and an area for the hospitality team that manages the facility. Every year about 10,000 people take part in different activities there, such as retreats, classes on Catholic doctrine, practical classes on the spiritual life, educational and cultural lectures, preached spiritual conferences and

week-long formational workshop for lay people. “La Stampa”, one of the leading newspapers in Italy, headlined our efforts inviting people to Murray Hill as “Opus Dei: Operation Transparency”.

d) The Website, and other information resources. The official website, www.opusdei.org, has proved to be an amazing instrument in a period such as this. The site is of its nature global, like the Da Vinci phenomenon. There we have offered the most extensive and detailed answer to the Da Vinci Code in 22 languages. During the year 2005, the American section of the website received more than a million different visitors (that’s visitors, not visits); and the total more than three million. The day that these reflections were finalised in New York, there had arrived 156 messages by 9 in the morning. One curious effect is the scholar-novelist Umberto

Eco's recommendation of the official Opus Dei website. Exhausted by continuous questions about the veracity of the DVC, Eco tells his readers, "Besides, if you want up-to-date information on all the matters in question, go to the site of Opus Dei. Even if you are atheists, you can trust it."

4. Together with the means themselves, we have tried always to maintain **a style and tone of respect** . This was something obvious, that we had decided from the start: while asking for respect, we should act with respect. This means never employing aggressive language, no attacks or threats, and never judging the intentions of others. We have tried to act within the coordinates marked by these three concepts: freedom, responsibility, dialogue. As one friend advised us, "Never lose your sense of humor... particularly with movies and

‘floating world’ of entertainment, your good nature and humor is your best defense”.

The blog started by Father John Wauck has been trying to poking a little light-hearted fun at the novel and the movie. It has been a good resource for maintaining morale at a high level. Countering a novel and a movie is a little bit like fighting against smoke. If you swing at it with boxing gloves, you wind up looking a little silly. Good humor works.

Provisional balance sheet

Only after the launch of the film will it be possible to draw up a complete balance sheet. For the moment we might mention three positive results of this information effort:

1) *Ecclesial co-operation* . A climate of co-operation has been generated among many ecclesial institutions, and many resources have been

produced to assist in the effort to make the Church and the person of Jesus Christ better known. In reality co-operation has extended outwards to many other Christians.

2) *Co-operation with journalists* . The media coverage during the first quarter of 2006 has been huge. While the promoters have invested massive sums of money “to sell their movie”, Catholics have tried “to tell their story”, supplying information to journalists.

3) *The response has worked* . The anticipatory action of many Christians has already created a general and growing awareness that the Da Vinci Code is unfair in its portrayal of Christianity, the Catholic Church, Opus Dei and history itself. Public opinion is putting the Da Vinci Code phenomenon “in its place”, as just the most recent product of a kind of “pseudo-pop culture” without any

connection with reality. Medieval historian Sandra Miesel considers the book so full of errors that, “I’m actually surprised when The Da Vinci Code is correct about anything at all.”

Faced with this clamor, the author of the book has had to post four different revisions of the DVC “fact” page of his website. The statements all come from Dan Brown’s website and are the succeeding answers to the same question: How much of this novel is based on fact?

- 28 August 03: “All of it. The paintings, locations, historical documents, and organizations described in the novel all exist (...)”.

- 17 January 04: “The paintings, locations, historical documents, and organizations described in the novel all exist (...)”.

- 11 May 04: “The Da Vinci Code is a novel and therefore a work of fiction.

While the book's characters and their actions are obviously not real, the artwork, architecture, documents (...)”-

- Current (30 January 06): “The Da Vinci Code is a NOVEL and therefore a work of fiction (...)”.

This provisional balance sheet cannot avoid one fundamental matter: will the movie cause offence? After all this time we have not managed to maintain a personal or direct communication with Sony Pictures. In this sense the communications action should be considered a provisional failure. We do not know whether the friendly insistence of so many Christians will have made some impact among the directors of this company and the team of professionals who have made the movie.

Conclusions

The Da Vinci Code has given us many headaches which, certainly, we would have preferred to avoid. Together with this we have to recognize that the decision to communicate our point of view openly and positively, in a proactive way, has generated a wonderful time to talk about Christianity, the Catholic Church and the little part of the Catholic Church that is Opus Dei. Therefore we would like to summarise the conclusions in the form of one lesson that we have learned, and one wish that we would like to express.

1. *The lesson* : the importance of taking care of communications strategies, both as regards what to communicate, and how to communicate it. We have confirmed the efficacy of what could be called the “strategy of the three ‘P’s’”: positive, professional and polite. From this position it is possible to be

listened to and understood, especially by the media, which in this kind of situation are not adversaries, because they understand that the Church is not a threat but a victim. The right strategies – positive, professional, polite – help to get rid of the sterile dynamic of confrontation.

I think that some words of the Prelate of Opus Dei in *Le Figaro Magazine* summarise this lesson:

“Ignorance is always bad, and information is a good thing.

Communication is not a game for amateurs. One learns with time to let oneself be known and also to know oneself. Some patience is also needed in this area.” (Le Figaro, 21-IV-06)

Patience could be considered as the fourth “P”.

2. *The wish* : that the powerful may be more respectful. That they may freely decide to improve their

strategies and become less arrogant and more open, on discovering that upholding respect does not reduce business, or lower the quality of art. The powerful in our society are often the big communications corporations. With more power comes more responsibility. And in the field of communications, the profit motive cannot be made absolute, to the detriment of the work of journalists, or creative writers, or the audience, especially young people. An African writer, Margaret Ogola, describes maturity as the realization that we are capable of offending, of wounding others, and acting in consequence.

Christians do not make their requests with threats, but out of freedom.

They do not have prejudices, nor do they label others: they are prepared to applaud from their heart the maturity of politicians, of businesses, or artists who decide to work for a

society at once free and respectful of others.

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Marc Carroggio, Rome Media Relations // Brian Finnerty, U.S. Media Relations // Juan Manuel Mora, Rome Department of Communications, Opus Dei