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The Da Vinci Code, the Catholic Church and Opus Dei

A response to The Da Vinci Code
from the Prelature of Opus Dei
in South Africa.

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Many readers are intrigued by the claims about Christian history and theology presented in The Da Vinci Code. We would like to remind them that The Da Vinci Code is a work of fiction, and it is not a reliable source of information on these matters.

The book has raised public interest in the origins of the Bible and of central Christian doctrines such as the divinity of Jesus Christ. These topics are important and valuable to study, and we hope that interested readers will be motivated to study some of the abundant scholarship on them that is available in the non-fiction section of the library.

Readers who do further research and exercise critical judgment will discover that assertions made in *The Da Vinci Code* about Jesus Christ, Mary Magdalene, and Church history lack support among reputable scholars. By way of example, the book popularizes the idea that the fourth century Roman emperor Constantine invented the doctrine of the divinity of Christ for political reasons. The historical evidence, however, clearly shows that the New Testament and the very earliest Christian writings manifest Christian

belief in the divinity of Christ. Other examples of discredited claims presented in The Da Vinci Code can be found in the article from Crisis magazine linked to at right. For readers who are willing to take the time to get to the bottom of the issues raised in The Da Vinci Code, we recommend reading Amy Welborn's book, De-Coding Da Vinci, or The Da Vinci Hoax by Carl Olson and Sandra Miesel (see links at right).

We also want to point out that The Da Vinci Code's depiction of Opus Dei is inaccurate, both in the overall impression and in many details, and it would be irresponsible to form any opinion of Opus Dei based on reading The Da Vinci Code. For those interested in further information about the various false impressions the book gives of Opus Dei, please continue reading.

1. Opus Dei and monks

Throughout The Da Vinci Code, Opus Dei members are presented as monks (or, rather, caricatures of monks). Like all Catholics, Opus Dei members have great appreciation for monks, but in fact there are no monks in Opus Dei. Opus Dei is a Catholic institution for lay people and diocesan priests, not a monastic order.

Opus Dei's approach to living the faith does not involve withdrawing from the world like those called to the monastic life. Rather, Opus Dei helps people grow closer to God in and through their ordinary secular activities.

“Numerary” members of Opus Dei - a minority - choose a vocation of celibacy in order to be available to organize the activities of Opus Dei. They do not, however, take vows, wear robes, sleep on straw mats, spend all their time in prayer and

corporal mortification, or in any other way live like The Da Vinci Code's depiction of its monk character. In contrast to those called to the monastic life, numeraries have regular secular professional work.

In fact, The Da Vinci Code gets Opus Dei's nature 180 degrees backwards. Monastic orders are for people who have a vocation to seek holiness by withdrawing from the secular world; Opus Dei is for people who have a vocation to live their Christian faith in the middle of secular society.

Additional explanation from leading Catholic figures of Opus Dei's focus on secular life.

2. Opus Dei and crime

In The Da Vinci Code, Opus Dei members are falsely depicted murdering, lying, drugging people, and otherwise acting unethically, thinking that it is justified for the

sake of God, the Church, or Opus Dei (p. 13, 29, 58-9, etc.).

Opus Dei is a Catholic institution and adheres to Catholic doctrine, which clearly condemns immoral behavior, including murder, lying, stealing, and generally injuring people. The Catholic Church teaches that one should never do evil, even for a good purpose.

Opus Dei's mission is to help people integrate their faith and the activities of their daily life, and so its spiritual education and counseling help members to be more ethical rather than less so. Opus Dei members, like everyone else, sometimes do things wrong, but this is an aberration from what Opus Dei is promoting rather than a manifestation of it.

Besides attributing criminal activity to Opus Dei, The Da Vinci Code also falsely depicts Opus Dei as being focused on gaining wealth and

power. Additional comment from leading Catholic sources on Opus Dei's alleged wealth and power.

3. Opus Dei and corporal mortification

The Da Vinci Code makes it appear that Opus Dei members practice bloody mortifications (e.g., pp. 12, 14, 29, 31, 73, 89, 127-28, 195, 276-79, 293). In fact, though history indicates that some Catholic saints have done so, Opus Dei members do not do this.

The Catholic Church advises people to practice mortification. The mystery of Jesus Christ's Passion shows that voluntary sacrifice has a transcendent value and can bring spiritual benefits to others. Voluntary sacrifice also brings personal spiritual benefits, enabling one to resist the inclination to sin. For these reasons, the Church prescribes fasting on certain days and recommends that the faithful

practice other sorts of mortification as well. Mortification is by no means the centerpiece of the Christian life, but nobody can grow closer to God without it: “There is no holiness without renunciation and spiritual battle” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 2015).

In the area of mortification, Opus Dei emphasizes small sacrifices rather than extraordinary ones, in keeping with its spirit of integrating faith with secular life. For example, Opus Dei members try to make small sacrifices such as persevering at their work when tired, occasionally passing up some small pleasure, or giving help to those in need.

Some Opus Dei members also make limited use of the cilice and discipline, types of mortification that have always had a place in the Catholic tradition because of their symbolic reference to Christ’s

Passion. The Church teaches that people should take reasonable care of their physical health, and anyone with experience in this matter knows that these practices do not injure one's health in any way. The Da Vinci Code's description of the cilice and discipline is greatly exaggerated: it is simply not possible to injure oneself with them as it depicts.

Additional explanation from leading Catholic sources regarding Opus Dei and corporal mortification.

4. Opus Dei and cult allegations

In various place, The Da Vinci Code describes Opus Dei as a “sect” or a “cult” (e.g., pp. 1, 29, 30, 40, and 279). The fact is that Opus Dei is a fully integrated part of the Catholic Church and has no doctrines or practices except those of the Church. There is no definition or theory - whether academic or popular - that provides a basis for applying the

pejorative terms “sect” or “cult” to Opus Dei.

Opus Dei is a Catholic institution that seeks to help people integrate their faith and the activities of their daily life. As a personal prelature (an organizational structure of the Catholic Church), it complements the work of local Catholic parishes by providing people with additional spiritual education and guidance.

Opus Dei was founded in Spain in 1928 by a Catholic priest, St. Josemaría Escrivá, and began to grow with the support of the local bishops there. It received final approval from the Vatican in 1950 and began growing in many countries around the world. Today Opus Dei has roughly 83,000 lay members and 2,000 priests. Several million people around the world participate in its programs and

activities, which are conducted in more than 60 countries.

The Da Vinci Code also makes melodramatic assertions that Opus Dei engages in “brainwashing,” “coercion,” and “aggressive recruiting” (pp. 1, 29, 325, 415), unfairly trying to tar Opus Dei with the same brush used against groups more deserving of such epithets.

Opus Dei proposes to people to give their lives to God, following a special path of service within the Catholic Church. One’s life can only be given freely, through a decision coming from the heart, not from external pressure: pressure is both wrong and ineffective. Opus Dei always respects the freedom of conscience of its members, prospective members, and everyone else it deals with.

As a manifestation of its beliefs about the importance of freedom, Opus Dei has specific safeguards to ensure that

decisions to join are free and fully informed. For example, nobody can make a permanent membership commitment in Opus Dei without first having completed more than 6 years of systematic and comprehensive instruction as to what membership entails.

Additionally, no one can make a temporary commitment before age 18, nor a commitment to permanent membership before age 23.

Additional explanation from leading Catholic figures on Opus Dei and cult allegations.

5. Opus Dei and women

The Da Vinci Code says about Opus Dei's U.S. headquarters: "Men enter the building through the main doors on Lexington Avenue. Women enter through a side street" (p. 28). This is inaccurate. People, whether male or female, use the doors leading to whichever section of the building

they are visiting. The building is divided into separate sections, for the straightforward reason that one section includes a residence for celibate women and another for celibate men. But these sections are not sex-restricted, and it is the women's not the men's section that fronts on Lexington Avenue, the opposite of what is said in the book. (Note: The book sometimes also inaccurately calls the building Opus Dei's "world headquarters").

The Da Vinci Code also suggests that women Opus Dei members are "forced to clean the men's residence halls for no pay" and are otherwise accorded lower status than men (pp. 41, 415-16).

This is not true. Opus Dei, like the Church in general, teaches that women and men are of equal dignity and value, and all of its practices are in accord with that belief. Women

members of Opus Dei can be found in all sorts of professions, those which society views as prestigious and those which society today tends to undervalue, such as homemaking or domestic work. Opus Dei teaches that any kind of honest work done with love of God is of equal value.

Some women numerary members of Opus Dei have freely chosen to make a profession of taking care of Opus Dei's centers, both women's and men's. They also run conference centers where activities of cultural and spiritual formation are held. These women are professionally trained and are paid for their services, which include interior decorating, catering and other highly skilled work. The millions of people who attend retreats or other spiritual formation activities at Opus Dei centers can attest to their professionalism. The Da Vinci Code's insinuation that their work lacks

dignity and value is demeaning to these women.

Additional explanation from leading Catholic figures on Opus Dei and women.

6. Opus Dei and the Vatican Bank

The Da Vinci Code says that Opus Dei was made a personal prelature as a reward for “bailing out” the Vatican bank (pp. 40-41, 415-416).

Neither Opus Dei nor any of its members helped “bail out” the Vatican bank. The Church’s authorities made Opus Dei a personal prelature in 1982 because they recognized that this new canonical category was a good fit for Opus Dei’s mission and structure.

In any event, the personal prelature status is nothing special: it is simply one of several canonical categories the Church has for designating an

institution that carries out special pastoral activities. In contrast to the implication given by the book, personal prelature status in no way implies some special favor of the Pope or that Opus Dei members are not under the authority of their local bishops.

7. The canonization of Opus Dei's founder

The Da Vinci Code suggests that the Church bent its canonization rules to put Opus Dei's founder on the "fast track" to being named a saint (pp. 40-41).

The canonization of St. Josemaría Escrivá in 2002 came 27 years after his death (not 20, as the book says). It was one of the first to be processed after the 1983 Code of Canon Law streamlined the procedures for canonization, and so it moved more quickly than was typical before. Mother Teresa is on pace to be

canonized even more quickly, having been beatified just 6 years after her death (Escrivá was beatified in 17 years). Even under the old procedures, the canonization of St. Thérèse of Lisieux made it through the process in 27 years, roughly the same as Escrivá's.

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