

Faith and Life REFLECTIONS

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The Da Vinci Code Decoded

Faith and Life Reflections is a monthly resource for lay and rostered leaders on headlines, current books, movies, social and ethical issues such as those involving natural disasters and developments in the church. Comments may be returned to the writer or to the editor, Mark A. Staples (Mstaples@Ltsp.edu, director of Faith and Life Programs at LTSP).

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The Context and Introduction to *The Da Vinci Code*:

- Dan Brown's novel **The Da Vinci Code** is a fascinating tale of conspiracy.
- It is a novel, not a factual history. Nor are the theological claims totally true.
- We live in a culture seduced by "truthiness" (Stephen Colbert). What "feels almost true" must be true.
For example: Reality shows, advertising, the claims of politicians.
- We live in a time when people are "seduced" by easy and simplistic answers to complex questions.
For example: Fundamentalism. Be religious without the church. "Fad" diets. Pill-popping.

The Story:

Robert Langdon, a Harvard "symbolist" is brought in to help the French police understand the bizarre killing of an art curator at the Louvre in Paris. Langdon teams up with Sophia, a sexy agent from the Cryptology Department.

What follows is a desperate race through the Louvre art gallery and European cathedrals, trying to find an ingenious code hidden in the art of Leonardo Da Vinci. But Langdon never locates the proof that is dangled like a carrot throughout the story, thus, making **The Da Vinci Code** a fascinating novel for a culture that is attracted by "truthiness" and conspiracy.

Fact or Fiction?

(a) What is **Opus Dei**?

The Code portrays **Opus Dei** as a fundamentalist cult within the Roman Catholic Church focused on self-atonement, self-flagellation, and strict doctrine.

Fact: The **Opus Dei** actually is an ultra-conservative movement in the Roman Catholic Church. At its heart is a new version of spirituality started by Josemaria Escriva, a Spanish priest, in 1928. Self-infliction of pain is part of the daily discipline. It is secret and attracting much money and high-profile followers [Actor Mel Gibson, Supreme Court justice Antonin Scalia, Attorney Robert Bork and U.S. Senator Rick Santorum (R-PA)].

(b) Who is sitting to Jesus' right in Da Vinci's painting of the "Last Supper?"

The Code suggests that it is a woman with long flowing red hair – presumably Mary Magdalene.

Fact: Conventions of Renaissance art called for John always to be depicted with long hair. So it could be Mary, but logically could be John. No absolute proof exists either way.

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(c) What is the Holy Grail?

The Code suggests that it is Mary Magdalene, whose womb held Christ's child – the blood of Christ.

Fact: Myths abound about what the Holy Grail is. Most refer to it as the cup used at the Last Supper – the blood of Christ. No absolute proof exists either way.

(d) Did Constantine create a Bible that emphasized Christ's divinity?

The Code suggests that Emperor Constantine, to quell religious turmoil, compiled a Bible that portrayed Jesus as more God than man.

Fact: The canon of the Bible was not by Constantine. The Council at Nicaea, called by Constantine in the Fourth Century, was held, and it did create a creed (statement) on how to understand the Bible and the divinity of Jesus.

(e) What is the origin of the six-pointed star?

The Code suggests that the star combines the symbol for masculinity (^ = the blade) and femininity (v = vessel).

Fact: The blade and the vessel were pagan symbols in many ancient cultures long before Christianity. The star of David was a symbol of Judaism before Jesus.

Throughout history there are stories involving the blade and the vessel. The most popular one is **The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future** written by Riane Eisler in 1987 (HarperSanFrancisco).

Questions to ponder and discuss:

- Would your faith be changed or challenged if new (more ancient) documents or gospels were found?
- Was Jesus ever married? Would it make a difference for you?
- Who was Mary Magdalene? Could she have been the leader of the apostles?
- Were there women leaders in the early Church? Was women's role later suppressed?
- How might we speak of Jesus' "blood line" as existing today? Image of God? Baptism? Body of Christ?
- Is the Bible based on "hidden facts" of the past, or is it a "Living Story?" for today?
- Can "God's message" remain the same as "our understanding" changes and our faith grows?
- Does "Gnosticism" (salvation by spiritual knowledge) attract us today? What about people who think that religion is a private and spiritual matter and reject the teaching authority of any Church?

Resources for further reflection (please note that Web links may change):

- a) **Up for Discussion – The Da Vinci Code** by Matthew Skinner, published by Augsburg Fortress, 2004 (a guide to purchase and download online www.augsburgfortress.org/store/item.asp?clid=176393&isbn=6000211473).
- b) **ELCA Seminary Professors and Film Reviewer Comment on the Da Vinci Code** found in ELCA News Service, May 18, 2006 (online www.elca.org/news/Releases.asp?a=3364).
- c) **Dan Brown's Truthiness**, an article in *The Christian Century*, May 16, 2006 (online www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=2058).
- d) **The Opus Dei Code** feature article in *Time* magazine, April 24, 2006 (online www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1184078,00.html).
- e) **The Mystery of Mary Magdalene** feature article in *Newsweek* magazine, May 28, 2006 (online www.msnbc.msn.com/id/12893635/site/newsweek/).
- f) **Peter, Paul and Mary Magdalene, The Followers of Jesus in History and Legend** by Bart Ehrman, Oxford University Press, 2006.

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