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"Da Vinci Code" -- a Blessing for Opus Dei?

The person who oversees Opus Dei's relations with the international media is interviewed about his perspective on the film The Da Vinci Code that will come out in theaters later this year.

02/10/2006

For the first time, in this interview, a representative of the "evil one of the film" -- the Opus Dei prelature --

offers his view on this production, which Sony-Columbia will release in May.

Marc Carroggio, who oversees Opus Dei's relationship with the international media, told ZENIT that interest about the book and the film "is turning out to be a sort of indirect publicity for us."

Carroggio added that, given the existence of the movie, there will be no fight against anyone. An effort is being made to take advantage of the great interest aroused to propose the figure of Jesus Christ, he stressed.

What do you most dislike about the book and now the movie?

Carroggio: I realize that fiction has its own rules and you shouldn't take it too seriously, but like any Christian I dislike the frivolous way the book plays with the life of Jesus Christ.

Moreover, scripts like this demonize a particular group. It presents the Catholic Church as a band of criminals who for 2,000 years has tried to hide a huge lie.

Although the story is absurd and at times somewhat humorous, it produces a hateful image of the institution and it is well known that hateful images like this produce feelings of hatred in those who lack a critical sense.

I don't think we need more caricatures of any religion. We should all be working for harmony, tolerance and understanding. You cannot be seeking peace with your left hand while you are beating people over the head with your right.

Opus Dei does not usually give official responses to events. Will there be an exception for the "Da Vinci Code" movie?

Carroggio: Some people are waiting for a "declaration of war" from the Catholic Church and from Opus Dei. This might interest those who are marketing the movie -- you know, a big fight in public.

But I can assure you that Opus Dei's only response will be a declaration of peace. No one is going to make threats or organize boycotts or anything like that.

We would have been happy if the producer, Sony-Columbia, had given us some sign that they would respect us. I would call their response so far "polite but noncommittal," with little indication that they intend to respect religious beliefs.

How do you think the members of Opus Dei will react to the movie?

Carroggio: The reaction of the members of Opus Dei, like that of

many other Christians, will be to "use the lemon to make lemonade."

Actually this event gives us a wonderful chance to talk about Jesus Christ. After all, it is the figure of Jesus Christ that explains, to a large degree, the popularity of the book.

The novel is essentially parasitical: The author makes a name for himself by attacking a major cultural figure, and he presents it as art. If the plot did not center on Jesus Christ, the book would lose its appeal.

I think that the best response is simply to help people to know Jesus Christ. I suspect that in the coming year, many people will be moved to read the Gospels or a book about the life of Jesus Christ.

They will be drawn to consider the great themes of faith, which give light to the most difficult questions of human existence. For me, these are

all ways of turning the lemon into lemonade.

In a certain way, Dan Brown has made Opus Dei more fashionable and given you an opportunity to explain yourselves. Have you noticed an increase in numbers of people seeking information?

Carroggio: Undoubtedly. In the last year, in just the United States, more than a million persons have visited our Web site [www.opusdei.org] and this is primarily due to interest generated by "The Da Vinci Code."

So we are receiving a sort of indirect publicity. This reminds me of what used to happen in the former Communist countries.

If an official organ published an article against the Church - at times attacking Opus Dei as well - we would receive secret messages from individuals who would read the

article "backward." They would conclude that if Opus Dei was being criticized by people who criticized the Catholic Church, then Opus Dei must be interesting.

Something similar is occurring with "The Da Vinci Code." We have already made quite a bit of lemonade with the book and, God willing, we hope the movie only increases production.

We will try to give out as much information as possible and will be completely open and available: The doors are open.

We would like to offer anyone who wants it the chance to know about Opus Dei firsthand. This, by the way, is something that seemed to interest neither the author of the book nor the producer of the movie.

Are you going to take legal action against the movie?

Carroggio: I would be surprised if that happened. Of course there are more than enough reasons.

Suppose a movie revealed that Sony-Columbia was not what we had always thought but was a secret group of assassins run by the Mafia, but included a disclaimer that it was just fiction. Somehow I doubt their lawyers would be satisfied. I am sure they would threaten a suit.

Still, legal action is like an icon of institutional conflict. It would be "Opus Dei vs. Sony-Columbia." To me that just sounds almost surreal. As I said earlier, the only thing Opus Dei is going to do is to make a declaration of peace. It takes two to fight and in this case we lack a quorum.

But there are members of Opus Dei in 60 countries. Some of them, with others, run centers that train farmers and young people who can't find work. They also run hospitals in

underprivileged areas. All these activities depend financially on the help of many donors. Obviously the novel and movie could make their fund raising more difficult. For this reason, it would not surprise me if some of these organizations thought about seeking damages.

Is Opus Dei going to advise its members not to see the movie? Or would it prefer that they be aware of the negative perception of Opus Dei in some circles?

Carroggio: Members of Opus Dei are adults. We are not going to advise them either way.

An interesting question is whether this movie should be only for adults. Any adult with a minimum of education can distinguish reality from fiction. But when history is manipulated, you cannot expect a child to make proper judgments.

Merely adding a disclaimer that says "Fiction" is not enough. Just as we protect children from explicit sex and violence, it would seem to make sense to protect them from violence that is more subtle and thus more insidious.

I think it is reasonable to be concerned about this question. Besides thinking about profits, one should also think about possible negative influences on the young. As I said earlier, this is not the time for sowing disharmony among persons, nations and religions, but rather understanding.

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(08/16/2025)