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Opus Dei's Earthly Weapon in Image Battle: Humor

Their Catholic organization's reputation tarnished by 'Da Vinci Code,' members find that laughter goes a long way.

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So a guy walks up to the doorman at Opus Dei's red brick national headquarters in New York City, points at an upper floor and asks, "Is that where you keep the torture chamber?"

"That's ridiculous!" says the doorman. "The torture chamber's in the *basement*."

That's not just a joke. It's a true story as told by the doorman in question, Robert Boone.

Boone's tendency to josh amid the scrutiny and ribbing that Opus Dei has been getting since the fictional "The Da Vinci Code" portrayed it as mysterious, brooding and tortured is catching on. Some former members of the group have used the book and movie as an opportunity to criticize Opus Dei as a controlling, authoritarian organization.

Instead of withdrawing from public view, the conservative Roman Catholic organization, founded in 1928, is attempting to repair its damaged reputation through public relations campaigns, with members doing broadcast interviews or

writing newspaper commentaries. It has also tried humor.

Which brings us back to the doorman who works the graveyard shift. Boone said a woman shyly inquired, "Is it true women aren't allowed in this place?"

"Nah. You can come in," Boone, an aspiring actor, said with studied bluntness. "But you'll burst into flames if you do."

She laughed, nervously.

Even disclosures about some of Opus Dei's more unusual activities, such as the self-mortification practiced by some members, have spawned in-house wisecracks and a new openness about the activities of the famously secretive organization.

Some Opus Dei members have spoken openly about the cilice — a spiked chain worn on the upper

thigh as a reminder of Christ's suffering. In "The Da Vinci Code," it's used by Silas, a murderous albino monk, who also whips himself with a "discipline," or knotted cord.

John Allen, the Vatican correspondent for the National Catholic Reporter and author of the book "Opus Dei," said the group "has always been a magnet for conspiracy theories."

"But it's changed significantly in response to the book and movie; it's more transparent and willing to respond to people's questions," said Allen, whose book's subtitle calls Opus Dei "the Most Controversial Force in the Catholic Church."

"So, there's a sense that the movie did them a big favor," he said.

"Historically, they've been seen as a big powerful group that victimizes its members. Now, there's a sense that it has been victimized itself."

And that is translating into both introspection and self-parody.

For example, a recent e-mail distributed among members and associates included this:

Q: Do members of Opus Dei use thecilice?

A: That question really rubs me the wrong way!

And this one:

Q: Do members of Opus Dei really use a "discipline"?

A: Beats me.

"The Da Vinci Code," which was published in 2003, and the film, which opened in May, suggest that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a child and that Opus Dei is a secretive and corrupt cult.

Opus Dei's response has been that the book and the film are anti-Catholic bigotry and a conspiracy of lies.

"If you can't laugh at 'The Da Vinci Code,' " mused Opus Dei spokesman Brian Finnerty, "what can you laugh at?"

In February, a flashy cover story in a prominent newsmagazine about the then-upcoming movie version of the book prompted Father John Wauck, a professor of literature at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome, to strike back with a whimsical website.

It's called davincicode-opusdei.com and features essays, related news items and the sometimes brutal reviews of the book and movie.

For example, Wauck posted Anthony Lane's review of the movie in the New Yorker magazine, which

concluded that "the sole beneficiaries of the entire fiasco will be members of Opus Dei, some of whom practice mortification of the flesh. From now on, such penances will be simple — no lashings, no spiked cuff around the thigh. Just the price of a movie ticket, and 2 1/2 hours of pain."

Over at Opus Dei's Tilden Study Center in West Los Angeles, director Enriqueta Villarreal said the problem has been keeping up with a recent flood of inquiries from people interested in possibly joining.

"I think the book exaggerated so many things, it's sparked a lot of curiosity," she said.

Wauck's website also features cartoons inspired by the movie, including one that depicted two gorillas. One tells the other: " 'Da Vinci Code' was OK, but I think 'King Kong' was much more realistic."

Wauck, whose lecture schedule on Da Vinci Code-related issues has taken him around the world, would be the first to admit that too much fun, particularly at the organization's expense, could ultimately demean it and its mission.

"There's a side to all this that is not a joke," Wauck said. "Many of us are concerned that people will assume ideas about Opus Dei that are extremely unpleasant."

Indeed, being thrust into the international spotlight has made for some uncomfortable encounters.

John Grieco, director of Opus Dei's Tenley Study Center in Washington, D.C., recalled flying back from Houston once when he noticed the woman next to him reading "The Da Vinci Code."

He asked, "Have you ever met a member of Opus Dei?" She said, "Oh, gosh, no. Never."

Grieco blurted out, "Pleased to meet you!"

The woman's jaw dropped, he said.

Grieco shared the story with a fellow Opus Dei member, who got a chance to try out a similar exchange with a fellow passenger on a flight a few months later. In his case, however, the woman didn't say another word for the entire flight.

Opus Dei, or "Work of God," is based on the idea that Catholics can live a sanctified life without being priests or nuns. Many of its 87,000 worldwide members — only 2% of whom are priests — operate universities, hospitals, secondary schools, media training programs and charities in 60 countries.

In a sign of the group's influence, Pope John Paul II placed Opus Dei's founder, the Spanish priest Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer, on the fast track to sainthood. In 2002, Escriva was canonized before a crowd of 300,000 in Vatican City's St. Peter's Square, a mere 27 years after he died.

As it turns out, there is an Opus Dei member named Silas, and he frequents the New York City headquarters just like the fictional albino monk. The real Silas, however, is a cheery and happily married Nigerian stockbroker.

"It's comforting to be so well known at this point in my life," said Silas Agbim. "Most reporters ask, 'Are you, in fact, a closet monk?' I smile and say, 'As you can see, I am neither a monk nor albino.' "

And that's no joke.

Louis Sahagun // Los Angeles Times

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