



Last week, at the High Mass, you heard a sermon about an entertaining and edifying film based on a book that can be described as a Christian allegory. It is the story of a Christ-like figure who lays down his life for his friends and then rises again in triumph. The film, and the book, I am talking about is, of course, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

Today I should like to reflect on another film, also based on a book, but of a very different character: *The Da Vinci Code*. Dan Brown's suspense-thriller hardly needs a word of introduction. Since the novel first appeared on the literary scene in 2003, it has become an international best-seller. With the imminent release of its film adaptation, its audience is bound to increase dramatically. The book's main idea runs like this: The early Church was allegedly engaged in a massive cover-up to suppress the knowledge that Jesus, a mere man, had a daughter by Mary Magdalene. According to the *Da Vinci Code*, this cover-up continues in our day and involves those sinister forces, the Vatican and Opus Dei.

At this point, you may want to ask, why should we take this seriously? After all, it's only fiction! Many people who have read the book will say that it is a gripping thriller, a page-turner, and that it is not a history book. Therefore, it is suggested, there is no need to 'refute' its claims since these are only part of a fictional story.

However, a closer look will show us that the picture is no so simple. There are many on-the-record statements from Dan Brown and his publisher to the effect that they were rather pleased to present 'hidden' or 'lost' historical ideas to a new audience. The way the book is written leads a reader who may be ignorant of history to believe that *The Da Vinci Code* is in fact presenting credible historical material. A recent survey in Canada found that of those who had read the book, a third of them believed 'there are descendants of Jesus alive today and a secret society exists dedicated to keeping Jesus' bloodline a secret'. A similar survey in the US or in the UK would most likely yield similar results. Discussion boards on the Internet show very clearly that many people either believe Dan Brown's most preposterous theories or, at the very least, believe that they 'could be' true.

The *Da Vinci Code* has a tendentious aim and uses a dangerous mixture of truths, half-truths and falsehoods to pursue this aim. The gross factual errors the book contains could have been corrected by a little bit of historical knowledge. As pastors of the Church, we cannot but be concerned that Dan Brown has succeeded in deceiving many of his readers. The *Da Vinci Code*'s work of deception begins on its 'Facts' page and goes on for almost 500 pages.

The 'Facts' page makes three basic claims. The first is that '[t]he Priory of Sion – a European secret society founded in 1099 – is a real organization'. However, in reality the so-called Priory of Sion is a twentieth-century fabrication created by a French con-artist named Pierre Plantard who before his death in 2000 had to testify under oath that *Les Dossiers Secrets*, which list the Priory's Grand Masters, were a fraud. A 1996 BBC documentary helped to clear the waters, which unfortunately Dan Brown, drawing heavily upon the book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, has muddled yet once again.

The second claim on the ‘Facts’ page is that ‘[t]he Vatican prelature known as Opus Dei is a deeply devout Catholic sect’. Opus Dei is not a ‘Catholic sect’, but a ‘Personal Prelature’ (not ‘Vatican prelature’) that functions like a non-territorial diocese in the Catholic Church. This means that its members belong to the personal prelature rather than to a territorial diocese, such as Westminster or New York. The members of Opus Dei are mostly lay people and only a few priests. Opus Dei was founded specifically to sanctify everyday life and work in the world. Its members are not monks, they do not wear ‘an ankle length hooded robe’ or a ‘wool robe with a rope tie’. They did not ‘bail out’ the Vatican Bank and they do not arrange assassinations.

By the end of the novel, after more than 400 pages of calumny against the Catholic Church, the reader of the *Da Vinci Code* learns that ‘both the Vatican and Opus Dei ... [turn] out to be completely innocent’ (p. 428). However, at this point, the damage is already done.

The last statement on the ‘Facts’ page is also dubious. Dan Brown assures his readers, as he has assured the viewers of his televised interviews, that ‘[a]ll descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.’ Well, no serious art historian would accept the notion that the figure to Jesus’ right in Leonardo Da Vinci’s *Last Supper* is Mary Magdalene. It is a young man whose youth dictated to Leonardo an effeminate rather than strongly virile depiction. That this figure is close to Christ’s bosom is a product of Dan Brown’s highly active imagination.

If the author of the *Da Vinci Code* doesn’t even get his so-called ‘Facts’ right, what should we think about the absurd theological claims he makes? In the book, the tiresome academic Sir Leigh Teabing claims to have ‘scientific evidence’ proving that ‘the Church’s version of the Christ story is inaccurate ... the greatest story ever told is, in fact, the greatest story ever sold’. We can grant Dan Brown one thing – he certainly knows how to sell a story, but the novel’s pseudo-history and neo-gnostic theology are, in a nutshell, rubbish.

The book’s most pernicious attack on the historical truth of Christianity is its claim that divinity of Christ was a doctrine invented by the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century. Up to that time, according to Dan Brown, Jesus was viewed by his followers as a mortal prophet. No one who ever looked into the New Testament could seriously hold the view that the notion of the divinity of Christ is absent from the scriptures.

The letters of St Paul, written in the middle of the first century, abound with the confession: ‘*Jesus is Lord!*’ ‘Lord’ is a divine title, the word pious Jews would substitute for the name of God, which they were forbidden to utter. Christians from the very beginning applied this title ‘Lord’ to Jesus. They knew him to be God – the God who emptied himself to come among us in human form. St John in his Gospel, written in the second half of the first century, made it quite clear that ‘the Word was God...and the Word became flesh’ (John 1:1, 14). The Evangelist also reports that on the Octave Day of Easter St Thomas the Apostle proclaimed the Risen Christ ‘My Lord and my God’ (John 20:28).

If you study theology or the history of the early Church at any university, you will need to look at the works of St Ignatius of Antioch, St Justin Martyr, St Irenaeus of Lyon, Tertullian, St Cyprian of Carthage, Origen, and others who all profess and explain their faith in the divinity of Christ, which was handed down to them by the apostles. All of these wrote long before

Constantine. What happened in the fourth century was that the Council of Nicea decided against Arius who taught that there was a time when Christ did not exist. It was Arius' view that was new. His opponents appealed most of all to the tradition of the apostles and the Fathers of the Church who had written before.

I am not going to talk about the ludicrous claim that St Mary Magdalene was Jesus' spouse and that she herself was the Holy Grail. All this is a denigration of an outstanding figure in the Christian Tradition. Mary Magdalen, along with Mary, the Mother of our Lord, and John, stood at the foot of Jesus' Cross. She kept vigil outside his tomb, and on Easter morning, she experienced before all others the Good News of his Resurrection. Thus do the canonical Gospels depict her. Since the eleventh century, St Mary Magdalen's relics have been venerated in the magnificent medieval basilica dedicated to her at Vézelay in France, not under that inverted glass pyramid in the Louvre where *The Da Vinci Code* would consign her.

What is so astonishing about *The Da Vinci Code* is that it is taken seriously at all. This fact would seem to indicate two things. First, the reason so many people are taken in by the book is the widespread prejudice against the Church in our society. We need not be too surprised about that, because our Lord Himself warned us it would happen; however, we must recognise it for what it is. If any such lies and defamations had been directed at the Koran or the Holocaust, it would have provoked a world uprising – and rightly so. But when it comes to the Christian faith, it's open season.

Secondly, the problem is that so many Catholics do not know their faith today. In many parishes and schools, the essentials of the catechism are no longer taught properly. This is a serious failing on the part of bishops and priests and everyone else involved in Catholic education. If Catholics knew their faith, they wouldn't say that *The Da Vinci Code* is 'interesting'. But given the state of things, we need to refute the claims made in that book. You worry about just which slander, falsehood or downright mistake people have swallowed wholesale.

To end on a more positive note, *The Da Vinci Code* phenomenon is a call on Catholics to deepen their knowledge of the faith and their love for Christ and His Church. Or, as St Peter puts it in his *First Epistle*: 'Always be prepared to make a defence to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you' (1 Peter 3:15). For this is at stake here: the hope that is in us, the hope that is grounded in our faith in the Crucified and Risen Lord.

