

“So, have you seen *The da Vinci Code* yet?”

After the big Cannes rollout and a blast of so-so reviews from the entertainment media around the world, I was more curious than ever to see the movie. I loved the book, in part because I read it two weeks after being in Paris and at the Louvre and in part because I had read *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* in 1983 when it was first published. I was intrigued by the notion of Jesus as a family man. There was one other reason: Ron Howard is a fine director and I wanted to see if he could do with this nail-biter what he had done with *Apollo 13*.

As the theater brightened and the credits came on, my wife and I both said, “So, what did you think?” Then we both answered, “I liked it!”

The da Vinci Code is a very close replication of the book. In other words, the story moves fast and is filled with intrigue—incredible escapes included. The character development is good and the story unfolds very close to Dan Brown’s version.

Some of the visuals (this might be where the Academy Award comes) are vintage Ron Howard. He takes us inside the cryptex code scroll, a technique in league with looking down at the blast-off of the Saturn V-B Apollo rocket as it comes straight at the viewer. In other instances, Howard melts the screen images into another time and place as illustrations of the immediate subject matter. One specific example is when heroes Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu are walking into the chapel where Alexander Pope presided at Isaac Newton’s funeral. As they step onto the busy modern day street, Howard juxtaposes images from 1727 and then, as the camera soars, the modern slips away and a long line of ancients makes their way to view the remains of the great scientist.

Much of the story of Jesus’ partnership with Mary Magdalene, her landing on the shores of France, and the subsequent legend of their family blood-line is told conversationally. That’s to be expected in a book, but in a movie that approach can become ham-fisted. It doesn’t. Howard masterfully interjects pieces of the tale as the action unfolds.

In one scene, Leigh Teabing, the esoteric professor obsessed with finding the Holy Grail, quotes from the Gospel of Philip as he instructs Sophie Neveu in the evidence connecting Jesus and M.M. Howard is adroit at diverting Teabing just as he says that Jesus often kissed her on the ... “mouth,” something that is actually missing from the text (there’s a big hole in the Nag Hammadi codex). So, the book’s information is cleanly presented and the scene moves on without Howard getting himself in trouble.

So, what's the Roman Catholic Church so hot under the collar for? Presumably it's that Opus Dei is really a benign sect of the church doing a lot of good for a lot of faithful Catholics. I can't possibly say how much of Brown's portrayal of Opus Dei is factual and how much is fiction. Opus Dei certainly doesn't get any brownie points, however, in the book or the movie.

Where the church really gets slammed by both is actually uncontroversial: the myriad things done in the name of Jesus Christ for two thousand years that are rather unbecoming a supposedly beneficent religious organization that wears the mantle as arbiter of morals, ethics, and values, and claims to be the representative of God on earth.

The da Vinci Code lays out in graphic terms (but not too graphic) a few of the commonly unknown unpleasanties of the church that are historical fact. For example: Emperor Constantine and the Council of Nicea when Jesus was "declared" divine by a bunch of bickering bishops and the subsequent murder of thousands who chose to continue adhering to the formerly orthodox position that Jesus was not divine (the Arians); the wholesale murder of the Templars and their followers on Friday, October 13, 1307 (Ever wonder why Friday the 13th became a bad luck day?); the Inquisition and murder of hordes of people (among them thousands of women accused of being witches). Suffice it to say that the church has reason to be embarrassed because it so often skipped commandment #6, "thou shalt not murder." An exhaustive list of other horrors can be found in any text book about the history of the western world since 30 C.E.

In sum, what the RC's have to shudder about regarding *The da Vinci Code* is their own history. How few people (Catholics and non-Catholics) really understand how nasty the church has been over the centuries. And now a miniscule snap shot of a few examples of that history is on the silver screen. (And this isn't even a Michael Moore documentary!)

In a climate where Catholic dioceses in America are paying millions of dollars to settle law suits because of pedophile priests, it's a small wonder that the powers-that-be want the movie squashed. What if "the faithful" realize there is a pattern of abuses—sex, murder, extortion, and more—out there that has gone on for two thousand years? Want to talk about indulgences now? A really white chasuble and miter cannot represent purity and innocence in the face of historical fact for ever—never mind Mr. & Mrs. J. ben Joseph of Nazareth.

My conspiratorial guess is that after failing to inhibit the movie (Howard did insist it was a work of fiction.) with boycotts and prayer, the church did what it could to sour the media reviews. Now that more people have seen the movie, it seems the reviews are improving.

Did Mary Magdalene marry Jesus? Hard to say. Want to see a good movie this summer? Try *The da Vinci Code*.