

Homily on *The DaVinci Code*

Feast of Corpus Christi
Church of Our Lady of Mercy
Kloof, South Africa

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The Case of the Smiling New Yorkers

Several years ago the rubbish collectors in New York City went on an extended strike, and garbage was piled high, indoors and out, all over the city. Everyone was up in arms, but one man organized a solution. He purchased a roll of beautiful wrapping paper and each day gift-wrapped his rubbish to look like a wedding – or a birthday present. He then placed the package on the back seat of his parked car, leaving the door unlocked. Every morning when he went to work, the package was gone. In a city of 10 million people, he was the only one with a smile on his face. As he told an interviewer when the strike was over, “You have to have faith in your fellow-man.”

Gift-Wrapped Rubbish

Now I’m about to say something you may feel is small-minded and ruse. If so, I do hope you will forgive me: but it seems to me that Dan Brown’s novel entitled *The Da Vinci Code* is very similar to that New Yorkers packages. It’s attractively wrapped, readily available and alluring to those who like fast-moving mysteries and conspiracy theories. But if you happen to know a bit of the history of the Catholic Church, you won’t read very far before coming to the conclusion that this is a lot of rubbish.

An Inadvertent Encounter with the Truth

Having said this, I must admit to a rather reluctant admiration for Dan Brown. As a one-time New Yorker, I’ve always had an interest in con-men. I once bought a lovely cashmere cardigan in an expensive-looking box from a man on the streets of New York City. When I got him and took it out the box, I found the cardigan had no back. It lay flat in the box, like a piece of paper. You had to lie down to wear it.

So I must admit to a reluctant admiration for Dan Brown’s scholarly scam, and have been following with interest the review, commentaries and television dramatization of his book. In the course of all this, I made a very surprising and significant discovery. The author quite inadvertently said something extremely worthwhile, something every Catholic should seriously consider. His unintentional encounter with veracity is, for us, a pearl of great price.

Why No Chalice at the Last Supper?

Here is how I stumbled upon this precious truth in *The Da Vinci Code*. Dan Brown was being interviewed on television and was explaining where he first got the idea for the book. It all began in a high school class-room, he explained. The teacher was showing the class a picture of Da Vinci’s Last Supper. “Do you notice anything unusual about this painting?” he asked. The students looked carefully, but were baffled. The teacher then

continued, “It’s what is not there that’s unusual. There’s no chalice! Why is there no chalice at the Last Supper when we know wine was poured?”

When the students couldn’t explain its absence, the teacher delivered his coup de grace. “There is a chalice!” he exclaimed. “Notice the person immediately next to Jesus, on his right. Everyone thinks its John the Evangelist, but this is not so. That person is Mary Magdalene, and she is Christ’s wife! They had a child, so their child is the chalice, the vessel that contains Christ’s blood!”

The Daughter’s Name is Sara

This, according to the author, is where he got his seminal idea for the book. As you know, in its final form the story became a conspiracy plot in which the Catholic Church attempted to cover up the marriage in order to save itself from ruin. Why? Because in the novel, the child not only lived, she later fled with her mother to Southern France, where she married into French royalty, and her descendants are still living today, despite the machinations of the Opus Dei movement, which is trying to squash the truth, by murder, deception and whatever other means are necessary.

According to a TV show I was watching, we even know the daughter’s name. It is Sara. In Japanese the word ‘sara’ means a ‘dish’. A poor Jewish refugee from a third-world country married into Gallic royalty. Sara must have been quite a dish to attract the kings of France.

The Feast of Corpus Christi

That, in the briefest of summaries, is an outline of *The Da Vinci Code*. But it does not contain that one hidden pearl of wisdom I think we Catholics need to reflect on it is this: In the novel the chalice, of Holy Grail as it was called in the middle ages, is not an object – not a vessel or a bowl – but a person. It’s Mary Magdalene and more specifically Sara.

Magdalene was a true ‘chalice of Christ’ as it were, but he would emphatically add that so are we. We are the body of Christ.

And he would certainly contest the casual assertion that John the Evangelist is really Mary Magdalene. True John is the only one without a beard because he was the youngest. When we were kids, we used to draw mustaches on ladies’ faces. That didn’t make them men. Nor does the absence of a beard make men women. Sex-changes are not quite that casual. The important point is that Christ lives, not in chalices, but in people.

The Eucharist: Not a Wedding Ring but a Spouse

And this is the point I feel we should seriously consider on the Feast of Corpus Christi. We still receive the Blessed Sacrament in the same way as did Catholics in Augustine’s day, 1500 years ago. But do we receive it with the same understanding as did Augustine’s converts.

We do receive the sacred host, with the same sense of awe and wonderment as did our North African predecessors of yesteryear. The question is do we receive the Blessed

Sacrament as a food that is intended to nourish the Christ-life that dwells within us? I think many of us see the Eucharist as an unspeakably precious gift from Christ. But for many of us is this not considered simply a temporary blessing, one we forget about totally when mass is over and we leave the church? Do we see the Eucharist as an essential food for the life that is in us? A spiritual health food?

You are What You Eat

St. Augustine often stressed to his parishioners a unique quality of the Eucharistic food we receive during mass. The ordinary food we eat daily at meal times, he says, becomes part of us. We are what we eat. That's why health foods are so popular today. But the Eucharist, he continues, is unique in that we become part of it. We become more Christ-like, more patient and kind, more forgiving and understanding. As St. Paul once said, "I live no longer, but Christ lives in me." (Galatians 2, 20) We still live our ordinary daily lives, but it is Our Lord who inspires our motives, attitudes and actions, We begin to see people and events through his eyes, to think as he did.

"I Have No Hands but Yours"

When Jesus was on earth, he used his own human hands to reach out to people, but when he wants to feed the poor today, he uses my hands, your hands to do this. As St. Theresa said, "Jesus has no hands today but yours and mine to lend the needy a helping hand, no feet but yours and mine to approach others, to visit the sick; no heart but yours and mine to care for others, to be kind to others, to love and forgive them." This is why Pope Benedict recently described the erotic love of husband and wife as among the highest forms of human love. "Eros tends to rise in ecstasy toward the Divine," he says. It is a totally self-giving of each spouse to the other, a love that wonderfully imitates the total self-giving that Christ himself shows when he gives himself to us at communion time. Nothing is held back, and it is promised forever. When we love others without reserve, be it spouse or children or loving our neighbor as ourselves, it is Christ within us who is enabled to show his limitless love for the person we love.

We are the Most, to Say the Least

And that is why I call the author of *The Da Vinci Code* both a con-man and a benefactor, one who reminds us that we are the true descendants of Jesus today. We are the missing chalice containing the continuity of Christ. To narrow this down to one person by changing St. John into Mary Magdalene may look like an attractive package, but its best left in the back seat of Dan Brown's car.

During the consecration, Jesus says to you "This is my body, given up for you." The most appropriate response, I think, to say, "And this is my body given up for you." We are the body of Christ, the extension of Christ in time, the presence of Jesus in the modern world, his hands and feet, heart and head.

A Novel Approach to Life?

Once we appreciate that, we have cracked The Da Vinci code. The quest for the Holy Grail is ended because we now know who Christ's descendants are today, and what they are doing. We are the descendants and we are doing – with Jesus – what he once did by

himself: bringing the love of the Father to those we meet.

So my advice is “go with Augustine.” Dan Brown’s novel is a good yarn; don’t let him pull the wool over your eyes.