

Dialogues on Da Vinci:
Catholic Scholars Respond to *the Da Vinci Code*



Edited by Thomas A. Baima

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With

Robert J. Barron
Agnes Cunningham,SSCM
Michael Fuller
Francis Cardinal George,OMI
Lawrence Hennessey
Graziano Marcheschi
James Presta

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The second group I need to acknowledge are the women and men who agreed to be interviewed for the *Dialogues on Da Vinci*. Everyone who participated in the dialogues did so generously, even though they all have very demanding schedules. Being people of pastoral hearts, they recognized at once how important it was to offer guidance to those Christians disturbed by *the Da Vinci Code*. Their insights, based on years of scholarship and teaching, enrich the dialogue.

All of the interviews were done in 2003 when the book reached the best-seller list. Now, with the release of the movie, I want to thank Coleen Dolan, the director of the Department of Communication and Public Relations and her staff for their efforts to equip parishes to respond to the pastoral questions this raised by *the Da Vinci Code* this second time around. I thank her especially for her help in the rapid distribution of the *Dialogues on Da Vinci*.

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Introduction

Thomas A. Baima

In 2003, author Dan Brown published his suspense novel, *the Da Vinci Code*. Very quickly it moved up the various lists of best-selling novels until it came to rest at the very top. And it stayed there. At the same time, I started to hear about the book from women in my parish and among the staff of my university. What struck me at once was how they were confused about basic Christian doctrine because of reading this book.

Gradually, more and more priests and ministers I know began speaking about the effect the book was having on members of their parishes. The book was raising questions and the faithful were looking for guidance. A couple of the priests chose to preach sermons which mentioned one or another of the issues in the book and at once they were confronted, usually at the end of the service, by many people asking them to “say more about this book.”

Dialogues on Da Vinci: Catholic Scholars Respond to the Da Vinci Code emerged out of these requests. Over a period of months in 2003 – 2004 I used my radio program, *Mundelein Seminary Presents: Speaking of Theology*, to interview experts in the several topics of controversy raised by lay people after reading the book. No sooner had we produced the first show, than a local pastor called and wanted to reproduce hundreds of cassette tapes for his parish. Clearly, there is an interest on the part of lay Catholics to engage this topic.

To that end, we transcribed the entire series of *Speaking of Theology* along with two other presentations and then compiled them into this little book. In keeping with the honor which Renaissance writers, like Leonardo Da Vinci himself, held for the classical authors, we are imitating Plato, by offering the presentation in the form of dialogues.

The book begins with an essay by Lawrence Hennessey which touches on each of the controversies in Brown’s book. This first chapter summarizes the book in brief. It was originally a lecture delivered at Saint

Norbert Parish in Northbrook, Illinois. With the second chapter the dialogues begin. I interviewed Fr. Robert Barron, the host of the popular *Word on Fire* radio program. This interview received such strong feedback, that I decided to extend the topic into a series. My colleague Dr. Graziano Marcheschi next interviewed Francis Cardinal George on the topics raised in the *Da Vinci Code*. This originally appeared on the monthly television show, "*The Cardinal, the Archdiocese and You.*" Chapter three continues the monthly dialogues from *Speaking of Theology*.

While this book is compiled from separate sources, all of these materials are interrelated. I read Fr. Hennessey's talk before planning the first *Speaking of Theology* program. Similarly, Dr. Marcheschi listened to the tape of my program with Fr. Barron before interviewing Cardinal George. *Catholic Scholars Respond to the Da Vinci Code*, therefore, was an actual dialogue between the various contributors before ever taking shape in the radio programs or in this book.

The point of this short book, then, is to present the conversation which Dan Brown's book provoked among my colleagues, which we shared through lecture, radio or television, in order to answer pastoral questions from Christians.

In the bookstore where I bought my copy of the *Da Vinci Code*, there was a large sigh over the counter. It read "Adult Fiction." That's truth in advertising. I described the book by four words: "Nice story, not true." I enjoyed reading the book. It is a fast paced mystery, a page turner. What I have not enjoyed is the confusion which the book has produced in some Christians. Because, while it is fiction, it resembles "historical fiction" people are confused between fact (of which there is little) and fiction (of which there is quite a lot). I hope this small book will help Christians to separate fact from fiction and protect their faith from doubt.

I want to thank the contributors for their participation in these dialogues. Each responded to the call of so many people to "say more about this book."

Everybody Loves a Conspiracy: Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*

Lawrence Hennessey

Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* has become a runaway bestseller. His novel (and I stress the book is a *novel*) is a clever, well-orchestrated thriller; his formula is straightforward:

- o sex (e.g., the alleged life-affirming sacred marriage [*hieros gamos*] of some ancient fertility cults, and the alleged marriage between Mary Magdalene and Jesus Christ);
- o sensationalism (e.g., a spectacular murder in the heart of the Louvre);
- o feminism (e.g., the alleged denigration of Mary Magdalene and the suppression of the eternal feminine to assure male dominance);
- o anti-Catholicism (e.g., the demonization of *Opus Dei*, the involvement of the nefarious Vatican in every sort of historical mischief, including the destruction of the Knights Templar, and the burning of witches);
- o the context of the occult (e.g., the Priory of Sion as the faithful guardians of secrets that could completely overthrow historical Christianity, and the secret celebration of the sacred marriage in torchlight by masked participants) .

As one of Brown's characters says: "Everyone loves a conspiracy." Another character says, "Misunderstanding breeds distrust." It is in the bowl of conspiracy and misunderstanding that Brown mixes the elements of his novel: The twelve apostles, led by Peter, and then the Vatican, aided and abetted by the Emperor Constantine conspired to suppress the true origins of Christianity---specifically the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene and, after their deaths (there being no resurrection) their "sacred" bloodline---all in order to maintain male dominance of the Christian movement.

Emperor Constantine insured the continuance of this fraud by officially declaring Jesus "divine," thereby discrediting his marriage. The apostles had already taken care of Mary Magdalene by marginalizing her as a prostitute; she could not possibly be the

symbol and carrier of the “eternal feminine,” which the apostles were determined to suppress, since it would completely subvert their authority.

Dan Brown builds his fantasy on some documents called the “Gnostic Gospels.” These are, in fact, real documents, which Brown reads through the filter of some selected elements of the “Grail Legend,” elements well attested in Grail-lore. The vast majority of the “Gnostic Gospels,” including the *Gospel of Mary (Magdalene)*, were written in the course of the second and early third centuries. Some of these were simply devotional literature of the kind we have today. Some of them, in fact the ones that Brown cites, were produced by Gnostic groups, claiming to have some secret knowledge, that would reverse/replace the selection of writings that are part of what we call the “Canon” of the New Testament.

What about the Gnostic *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* and Dan Brown’s theme of Mary Magdalene as the symbol of the “eternal feminine,” in fact, the goddess, the source of all life? The word, *gnosticism*, built up from the Greek word, *gnosis* (knowledge) is a catch-all kind of word. It is used to describe a large number of esoteric groups claiming to possess a secret knowledge into the true state of reality. Some of these groups pre-date Christianity and were present within pagan cults; some were present within Judaism; some were present within various Christian communities; some were independent. The adherents of these groups are called “gnostics,” that is, “knowing ones.” What ties these diverse groups together is a common belief in what is called an “ontological dualism.” This means that the whole cosmos is composed of two irreconcilable principles, spirit/light and darkness/matter. These two principles are in eternal opposition and combat with one another.

This might make more sense if I give a brief summary of the major differences between Gnosticism and Christianity. Gnosticism was deeply scandalized by humanity. Our bodies, the gnostics maintained, were the creation of the evil god, imprisoning a divine spark which could only be freed by secret knowledge. A gnostic

would never allow that the “God of Light” would ever involve himself in any materiality whatsoever. In the form of Gnosticism infecting Christianity, the gnostics maintained that in Jesus, God only *seemed* to become a human being, but, in fact, did not.

Christianity, on the other hand, proclaims a true incarnation of the Son of God; the Son becomes a full human being. His human, moral act of redemption is also a divine gift and an historical action, objectively establishing redemption.

The attitude of Gnosticism towards history is indifferent or hostile, neither hopeful nor confident in history as a means or carrier of salvation and revelation. For Christianity, it is just the opposite; God’s purpose and His incarnate life have entered human history.

This difference is crucial. This is why it was possible for the Gnostics to write new “gospels”; in no way did they find themselves bound by what may or may not have happened to Jesus while He was on earth. Mary Magdalene could become Jesus’ wife; the rest of the New Testament could be dismissed as essentially false. What actually happened when Jesus was on earth, if He ever was, was simply irrelevant. Since the evil powers would distort the real truth, it must be kept secret and only shared with those who were initiated into the privileged circle.

It should also be mentioned that any honest reading of the “Gnostic Gospels” should give pause to anyone who thinks they support the cause of contemporary feminism. Dan Brown makes much of the *Gospel of Mary (Magdalene)*. In the *Gospel of Mary (Magdalene)*, an early 3rd century document written in Greek, Mary Magdalene says this of Jesus: “Let us praise his greatness, for he has made us ready, and made us to be males” (p. 342).

The word used here is *andres*, “males,” not *anthropoi*, “men,” in the sense of “human beings.”

So, too, the so-called *Gospel of Thomas*, which Dan Brown also mentions as one of the suppressed secret documents:

“Simon Peter said to them: ‘Let Mary (Magdalene) go out from among us, because women are not worthy of the Life.’ Jesus

said: 'See, I shall lead her, so that I will make her male, that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven'" (Logion 114).

The assumption by women of various leadership roles in some Gnostic groups was to assist and further this process of becoming male. Remember, Gnosticism is scandalized by our humanity. According to the Gnostics, the New Testament fact that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully a human being simply cannot be true. God would never become so involved with human beings. (It might be worth noticing that contemporary, *secular* feminism is deeply *Gnostic*. The common political badge of "liberation" is the capacity to kill one's unborn child, an implicit and explicit denial of motherhood, both potential and actual. Too many secular feminists are deeply scandalized by the "humanity" of motherhood, and so it is systematically devalued and denied. In its place is celebrated women's access to the traditional *male* structures of power and accomplishment.) Anyone interested in an authentic Christian feminism will find no support in the "Gnostic Gospels"; the only secure, truly historical foundation is the New Testament as we have always known it.

Something very curious is going on here. For the last 150 years, skeptics have been denying the historical reliability of the New Testament. Today, the "Gnostic Gospels," all of which were written after the New Testament and were never taken as historical documents even by the Gnostics themselves, are treated as if, at last, we are being given the true picture of the early Church. Dan Brown's novel, grounded in Gnostic stories and fragments of the Grail Legend, clearly has had an impact among many Christians. I have actually heard otherwise sensible Christian people say they never realized that Brown's story is the true story. I am not sure that those who think this way realize what is being asked of them. Dan Brown's novel claims that Christianity has been a cynical and deliberate fraud right from the very beginning; the true story of Jesus

was suppressed; and only now, is the truth being told. In actual fact, the book has as much connection to Jesus of Nazareth and early Christian origins as does "Raiders of the Lost Ark" to Old Testament archeology, or "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" to Medieval studies---in fact, less.

According to Dan Brown's novel, the Church marginalized Mary Magdalene by declaring her a prostitute, because admitting that she was Jesus' wife would destroy the foundations of the Christian faith. In fact, the early Church called Mary Magdalene "the Apostle to the Apostles"; she was the one who brought the others the good news of the Lord's resurrection. In the 7th century, Pope Gregory the Great conflated the stories of four women: Mary Magdalene, the woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee, Mary the sister of Lazarus, and Mary of Egypt (who was, in fact, a repentant prostitute, and who became a veritable "icon" of repentance for both men and women in early Christian monasticism). This mistake is actually rather easy to make. Pope Gregory's reason was not to discredit Mary Magdalene; it was to offer women, who were in fact prostitutes, a hope that they were not outside the reach of God's love. Contemporary biblical scholarship has been able to "un-sort" this ancient conflation.

Another point that can be mentioned here. The New Testament teaches that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully a human being (a fact reaffirmed at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, in the face of those who tried to deny the Lord's full humanity). Although we have no evidence at all, just suppose, for the sake of argument, that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene. How would it undermine the foundations of the Christian faith if He was? Only someone deeply scandalized by his/her own humanity would have trouble with someone fully divine and fully human being married. Marriage, after all, is a sacrament---an explicit sign of Christ's closeness to us. This means in every sacramental marriage, Christ is there at the heart of things. If, in fact, the incarnate Son of God were married, why would a sacramental Church try to keep it a secret?

And again, if Jesus were not fully divine, why would we pay any attention to him in the first place? All he would be is some obscure married rabbi, with no particular or compelling claim on our attention. In fact, he would probably be long since lost to history.

As a Catholic Christian, I find Dan Brown's portrayal of the Church's alleged suppression of the "eternal feminine" (primarily, he says, by marginalizing Mary Magdalene as a prostitute) to be absurd. It is precisely Catholicism and Orthodoxy that placed the "eternal feminine" next to the heart of our faith. Catholics cannot understand themselves apart from Mary of Nazareth, the Mother of Jesus Christ. Listen to this:

God, then, is the Father of the created world, and Mary the mother of the re-created world. God is the Father by whom all things were given life, and Mary the mother through whom all things were given new life. For God begot the Son, through whom all things were made, and Mary gave birth to him as the Savior of the world. Without God's Son, nothing could exist; without Mary's Son, nothing could be redeemed.... Truly the Lord is with you, Mary, to whom the Lord granted that all nature should owe as much to you as to himself (St. Anselm, *Oratio*, 52).

The quotation is from a prayer of St. Anselm, read across the Catholic world on Dec. 8th, the feast of Mary's Immaculate Conception. There are literally tens of thousands of such texts written throughout the long history of the Catholic Church---a church alleged to have suppressed the "eternal feminine."

Finally, what is that makes this novel so popular right now, especially among women? Whether Dan Brown sincerely hates Christianity (and the Catholic Church in particular), and is engaged in a kind of "anti-crusade," as some allege, is a question I'll set to the side. I can see why some allege this is so, but I honestly don't know his true intentions. What I think Dan Brown has done, despite all his Gnostic flim-flam and distortion of the Grail Legend, is portray an intimate relationship between Jesus Christ and a woman; and I think

that portrait has struck a deeply affective chord in the lives of many women.

In the years after the Second Vatican Council, despite so many wonderful and lasting accomplishments, I think in many places we failed to hand on the faith by poor catechesis and the neglect of ongoing education. Many people simply don't know even the rudiments of our history. In certain places, churches were stripped of statues and stained glass, symbols that are themselves catechetical. The cult of Mary and the saints was downplayed and diminished; in many places, devotional life all but disappeared. The net effect of this appears, in too many places, to be an *affective* vacuum. It becomes increasingly difficult for people to *imagine* a real, affective relationship with Jesus Christ.

In what we know of religious psychology, it is not unfair to say that our present-day liturgy is deeply masculine; so, too, is the new catechism. It is also true that an affective vacuum hurts men and well as women; but I suspect that women will notice it first, especially on the level of their own religious and affective response. I wonder whether the popularity of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and its portrait of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, especially among so many women, is not a clear signal (and warning), arising from their religious and affective response, for us Catholics to tap more deeply into our own great Tradition and recover more of the rich beauty of its affective resources.

Nevertheless, an authentic response is not going to be found in old documents from esoteric groups deeply scandalized by the human condition to the point of wanting literally to turn women into men. (By the way, as Cardinal George recently observed: "Interestingly, much of the antagonism toward the Church today stems from opposition to her teachings about sexuality, marriage and celibacy, and the nature of ordained priesthood, all beliefs that take flesh seriously" [*Catholic New World*, Dec. 7, 2003].) The authentic response is only going to be found among those who believe in the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ, born in time of Mary of Nazareth,

and present to us still, not just in words and documents, but in liturgy and sacrament and at the very heart of each of our lives.

Fr. Hennessey offered this Appendix to clarify in more detail certain terms:

1. **Canonicity:** The canonical writings are those the churches across the Christian world agreed were rooted in the apostolic experience of earliest Christianity and bore authentic, historical witness to the Christ event. The process that led to this selection was not secret; in fact, it was quite open. Never did the early Church place credence in any alleged secret “tradition” that was unknown to everyone else. There were simply too many eyewitnesses of the events to be able to perpetrate such a fraud. The New Testament, in the form that we know it, was pretty much in place by the turn of the first century (100 AD).
2. To allege that the Gnostic documents were destroyed by order of the Emperor Constantine after the Council of Nicaea in 325 is a fiction. The Gnosticism that produced the *Gospel of Mary (Magdalene)* had already run its course long before Constantine became sole emperor in 324.
3. The “Discovery” of the Gnostic Texts by the Priory of Sion: Another fiction is the idea that these texts were preserved and kept secret by a secret society called the Priory of Sion--- a group said in the novel to have discovered them in the foundations of Herod’s temple during the Crusader occupation of Jerusalem. The substance of these texts have been known throughout the history of Christianity. Every one of them has been published in a scholarly edition and translated into the major European languages. My own English translation of this body of documents was published in 1965.
4. **The Priory of Sion and the Knights Templar:** As for the

“Priory of Sion,” Dan Brown provides an alleged “fact” sheet, immediately preceding his novel. The only “fact” in what he says about this group is that it “is a real organization.” This organization was first registered with the French government in 1952, as a fraternal organization. It was not founded in 1099; it is not the same thing as the Knights Templar. The Knights Templar were founded c. 1119 for the protection of pilgrims traveling to the Holy Land. Their Rule was apparently written by St. Bernard of Clairvaux. They were attacked, not by Pope Clement V, but by the French king, Philip the Fair, who coveted their great wealth for his foreign adventures, including his war against Pope Boniface VIII. In 1312, King Philip coerced Clement to suppress the order as a canonical entity; he did so without judging or condemning the order. Clement was a Frenchman, living in France in the county of Comtat, which belonged to the papacy. The Pope never ordered the execution of any Templar.

The What's Wrong with the Da Vinci Code¹

An interview with Robert E. Barron

Mary McDonough: The Archdiocese of Chicago is pleased to welcome you to *Speaking of Theology*, a monthly program on the Catholic intellectual life. The Catholic Church has a long and rich history of examining the great questions of life, guided by the revelation of Jesus Christ. Let's go now to the campus of the University of St. Mary of the Lake / Mundelein Seminary where we will join the provost, Fr. Thomas Baima.

Fr. Thomas A. Baima: Greetings from Mundelein Seminary! I'm Fr. Tom Baima, you host for *Speaking of Theology*. Today, we will be discussing one of the most widely read books on college campuses, *The Da Vinci Code*, by Dan Brown. To help us with this discussion, I am joined by the host of another program on Catholic radio, the Rev. Robert Barron. Father Barron is chairperson and professor in the Department of Systematic Theology and associate director of the Doctor of Ministry program here at Mundelein Seminary. He is nationally known as a lecturer and retreat director as well as being a prolific author. Some of his books include: *The Strangest Way: Walking the Christian Path*, *Creation as Discipleship*, *Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master*, *And Now I See: A Theology of Transformation*. Perhaps especially relevant for our conversation today, he has written a book about medieval cathedrals, *Heaven in Stone and Glass*. Fr. Barron received his master of arts in philosophy from the Catholic University of America; master of divinity and licentiate in sacred theology from the University of St. Mary of the Lake, and doctorate

¹ This edition of *Speaking of Theology* aired on November 7, 2003 on AM 820. *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown is published by Doubleday, 2003.

in sacred theology from the *Institut Catholique de Paris*. Fr. Barron, welcome to *Speaking of Theology*.

Fr. Robert J. Barron: Thank you, it's good to be with you. I am especially pleased to be talking about this topic, *The Da Vinci Code*. I preach each week at Sacred Heart Parish in Winnetka and I happened to mention this book in passing in a homily. After the Mass was over a very large crowd of people gathered around me and said: "Say more about *The Da Vinci Code*." I was critical of it in the homily and they said: "Well, what's the matter with it?" The book is so widely read, as you say, by a lot of Catholics.

Fr. Baima: I was reading in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, which is a kind of trade publication for universities, that it is the second most widely read book on college campuses this past week.

Fr. Barron: Yes, I believe it. And it is on the top of most best-seller lists. So, a lot of people, including Catholics, are reading it and are troubled by it. It is a good book, in the sense that it is easy to read. It's a fast paced story, a thriller. The chapters are very short, so it is designed to be read easily and quickly.

Fr. Baima: But what I'm hearing from people, given all that, is a question: "Is it true?"

Fr. Barron: I'd say it is false in almost all of its details, historical and theological. The trouble is that the very alluring quality of the book leads people to say: "Well, this must be the case." A lot of Catholics are bothered by it because, as you know, the Catholic Church really is 'enemy number one' in this book. And what is being gone after in the book is not only the Catholic Church as an institution, but Catholic doctrine and theology. So, we do need to be concerned about it. I think we Catholics need to speak out against it.

Fr. Baima: Then let's talk for a minute about the context. There is always a problem with historical novels where you take facts of history and then build a fictional story around them. I was pleased when I went into a major chain bookstore to buy the book in preparation for this show to find it in the "Fiction" section. That's truth in advertising.

Fr. Barron: That's encouraging.

Fr. Baima: Yes, it was very clearly marked as fiction. I found it with another selection of books that were clearly marked as fantasy. So, I thought, at least this book-seller is sending out a signal of truth in advertising. What you are reading here is fiction. But, when someone writes historical fiction of any sort there is always this strange mixture of dates and places and facts of history, used quite liberally for the purpose of a good story.

Fr. Barron: And that's the problem. The genre allows the author to play fast and loose with facts, and not only with facts but with doctrines which are very sacred to Catholic theology. So, precisely under the cover of the genre of historical fiction an awful lot of dangerous stuff is being pushed forward.

Fr. Baima: Some people have asked me if I think the book is intentionally anti-Catholic. That brings us into the present moment of history. Could you talk a little about the present context in which this book has been released.

Fr. Barron: As you well know, it is a rich and complex question. Anti-Catholicism has been around for a long time and especially in our culture and our country. This goes way back into the nineteenth century in very explicit forms. For example, the attacks on convents and monasteries; political parties organized in explicitly anti-Catholic ways, for example, the No-Nothing Party of the 1840's, and so forth.

But coming up through the 19th century and into the 20th century, in very institutional ways, you find anti-Catholicism. Especially now, partially in the wake of the sex abuse scandals, I think it has allowed the old virus of anti-Catholicism to re-surface. This book is a prime example of it, it seems to me. Now, I can't read the author's spirit and soul, but the thrust of the novel is clearly anti-Catholic. The Catholic Church is described as the principal enemy.

Fr. Baima: There is something in the popular climate right now, which makes it seem acceptable to demonize the Catholic Church. This book, in a certain sense capitalizes on that climate.

Fr. Barron: Quite right. In some ways it's a back handed compliment, that the Catholic Church is the religion that people go after. When the Catholic Church is seen as the enemy, it does show our primacy, but also what is recognized even by our enemies, the power of our theological statements. It's a kind of an odd, back-handed compliment. The times today have allowed this virus to come forward.

Fr. Baima: Could you say something about the features of anti-Catholic rhetoric, as it has appeared historically. What were some of the themes from a century ago that we can recognize as being played out in this text.

Fr. Barron: A big part of it is the theme is that Catholicism is the enemy of modernity. Go back to texts in the 19th century. Go back to formal speeches, even by American presidents. Go back to newspaper accounts, and you will find the claim that Catholicism represents medieval obscurantism, superstition, and the oppression of independent thinking. So, modernity had to emerge over and against Catholicism. The Catholic Church was seen then as the enemy by many advocates of liberal democracy of the modern cultural form. That view continues to exist, even in the modern

period, and has to be fought. You can see, even to this day, that somehow we represent an obscurantism and a superstition that has been overcome by modernity. Yet we are still around, so we have to be fought. I think that sense of anti-Catholicism comes up in this book.

Fr. Baima: If somebody wanted to explore the whole question of anti-Catholicism, where would you suggest they look? I ask this because we're going to leave this topic behind and move on in our conversation. Is there any good source that a Catholic listener who wants to follow up on these comments could go to?

Fr. Barron: Good. Two books come to my mind. The first is the new Phillip Jenkins book on Anti-Catholicism.² Jenkins is an author I quite admire. This book rehearses the history of anti-Catholicism but also tries to name why it's coming up again today.

Fr. Baima: Professor Jenkins is not a Catholic, is he?

Fr. Barron: No. He was a Catholic, but then left the Church and is an Anglican, an Episcopalian. But, he writes in a very pro-Catholic way and is very deeply sensitive to Catholic issues. The other book I would recommend is John McGreevy's *Catholicism and American Freedom*.³ He is a professor at the University of Notre Dame. The book just came out a few months ago. It is a very good history of how Catholicism has been received in the American political culture. Both of these books are quite illuminating.

Fr. Baima: In this book, *The Da Vinci Code*, there is a particular view of religion that our listeners may not be familiar with so before we launch into an analysis of the text, I want you to start by being a

² Philip Jenkins, *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³ John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003).

teacher for a minute and describe for us the religious view of Gnosticism.

Fr. Barron: Yes, I sniff out from this book, as I do for many things in contemporary culture, the old influence of Gnosticism. The word, of course comes from the Greek word: *gnosis*, which simply means “knowledge.” While Gnosticism has a lot of features, I’ll say something about just one of them. The private knowledge, that a Gnostic claims, is that religious symbols, religious rituals are related to private, interior, psychological experience. This is the face of Gnosticism that I want to emphasize. The view is that the objective revelation of the great religions does not matter so much. What matters is the inner experience, that I can access psychologically, which is then expressed in the great symbols of the religions. It means that the objectivity of the religions is not as important as the subjective experience, or the psychological experience. That form of Gnosticism is very old and it pops up time and time again. In contemporary culture you find this tendency in the psychological writings of Carl Jung. His works have been very influential. Watch any of the *Star Wars* movies and you can see Carl Jung on display. He taught that inner experience is the ground of religion.

Fr. Baima: Stop and tell us who Carl Jung is. Some of our listeners may not be familiar with him.

Fr. Barron: Jung was the great Swiss psychologist, a disciple of Freud, who died in 1963. He did most of his writings in the 30’s, 40’s and 50’s. Jung had a powerful influence on the popular culture through a particular person, namely, Joseph Campbell. I remember 15 years ago there was a series of interviews with Joseph Campbell. He was a psychologist and comparative mythologist and he presented a through-going Gnostic reading of Christianity. This reading said that such symbols as Jesus, the incarnation, the Cross, redemption, the Virgin birth are all fine, not as objective revelation but as expressions

of subjective experience. Now, that proved to be a very popular reading. It's accessible, we can experience it. We don't need the baggage of an objective revelation.

Fr. Baima: This approach also plays into the whole mindset of a therapeutic culture.

Fr. Barron: Absolutely. And the two psychological figures, Jung and Campbell are responsible for it. This view is very old and it's very contemporary. It comes up very clearly in *The Da Vinci Code*. That's Brown's reading of Christianity. Classical Christianity has to be healed. It has to overcome its obsession with revelation and realize that it too participates in this grand, universal, psychological experience. I think that's the mark I see in *The Da Vinci Code*.

Fr. Baima: And this would be a reason why, in a culture that's very positive toward therapy, when an ordinary Catholic reads this book, it would seem to make sense, seem to be reasonable. It participates in the overall culture of America at the beginning of the 21st century.

Fr. Barron: Quite right.

Fr. Baima: And that culture is one which holds that the most real thing in life is psychological reality and that healing is fundamentally about healing the psyche.

Fr. Barron: Again, quite right. I would just add to that another quality; our American impatience on anything that is imposed on us from the outside. Religion is ok, so long as it comes up from my inner experience and I can validate it myself. But, if you are telling me that there is a objectivity to revelation, and that I have to conform my mind and my psyche to that . . .

Fr. Baima: Americans don't do that very well.

Fr. Barron: Right. We don't like that. So, a book like this, which proposes in another form the Gnostic view of Christianity, is always going to be popular.

Fr. Baima: One of the things we frequently find in the contemporary Gnosticism is this approach to the symbol of the feminine. I think that the description you have just given allows us to play that out what's going on with this particular symbol. This stress on the feminine is completely dominant in *The Da Vinci Code*. Could you say a little bit about the mythic symbol of the feminine in the Gnostic worldview.

Fr. Barron: Good, I think the two influences that I see so strongly in the book are Gnosticism and then, as you say, feminism and the focus on the sacred feminine. I'd ask this question. Is there something in our psychological structure that we could identify as a more feminine principle, non-violent, more compassionate? Does that get externalized in the ancient great religions as the goddesses? Yes, that's the Gnostic reading. It is assumed throughout, *The Da Vinci Code*, that classical Christianity suppresses this impulse, suppresses this insight. Christianity takes the symbols of the feminine and either gets rid of them, or transmutes them in some way. I would say that this is the meeting of Gnosticism with late 20th century feminism. Now, there is this feminine quality within us and late 20th century feminism has really run with that. Feminism claims that the classical religions have suppressed this feminine quality. So, *The Da Vinci Code* is a sort of hymn of praise toward the sacred feminine, and calls for the recovery of it over and against the classical religions.

Fr. Baima: But this is one of the points where, being a work of historical fiction, the book does not reflect actual history. I think of what I know of medieval history. The medieval life of the Church was shot through with the feminine dimension. The whole cult of the

Blessed Virgin Mary, and Marian spirituality are examples. Now, a radical shift does occur with the Reformation which moved Marian spirituality out of the forefront of Christian life. But, that was certainly not true of medieval Catholicism.

Fr. Barron: Quite right. And as you mentioned the medieval cathedrals, which I love so much, note that they come up in a funny way in the book. The contention of *The Da Vinci Code* is that the medieval cathedrals are some kind of hidden code language.

Fr. Baima: You wrote a book on the medieval cathedrals and spent a lot of time studying this question. How many years did you live in France?

Fr. Barron: Three years. I lived there while I was studying for my doctorate. I did some tours of the gothic cathedrals and did some study of them and their symbolic structure. The contention of *The Da Vinci Code* is that these are expressions of the sacred feminine that kept coming through in spite of official Christianity, in a surreptitious way, in a symbolic way. To me, it's much easier to say, (because of course it's true), that the cathedrals are temples to the Mother of God. That's how they were seen. It is true of Notre Dame de Paris (Our Lady of Paris), Notre Dame de Chartes (Our Lady of Chartes), that they are temples to the Mother of God, so you can find a great deal of the feminine in them, certainly. But what I wouldn't say is that they are, in some way, a re-expression of goddess language. I agree with Saint Augustine, I'm glad that the ancient gods and goddesses are gone. If you read their stories, these are not friendly people. The ancient gods and goddesses were capricious, violent, demanding. Christianity overcomes that, quite rightly, in the name of the Crucified God, the non-violent God. So, I'm happy to see those pagan figures gone. The medieval cathedrals are not a kind of hidden reaffirmation of the ancient goddesses; they are an affirmation of the Mother of God. And they are full of the feminine, a

rose window for example. Chartes itself was quite rightly seen as the body of the Virgin. The nave of the church was seen as the womb of the Virgin, not the ancient goddesses. The symbolism is that of Mary, the Mother of God. So, I resent, as a Catholic Christian, the willful misreading of our own symbolic buildings.

Fr. Baima: You mention another fact, that this book and its author, while he alludes to the ancient religions, he sanitizes them for modern consumption.

Fr. Barron: Oh yes.

Fr. Baima: I say that because, if you read the Gnostic texts, there are things in there that are dramatically opposite to what the book portrays. I say that Brown sanitizes the ancient religions, because he does not bring those things forward. The author uses Gnostic symbolism, he uses Gnosticism as the basis for the book but he does a great deal of selective editing to make it palatable to the modern culture's tastes. Could you say a little bit about that?

Fr. Barron: Yes. It's important to say that, at certain phases in our history, the Church did suppress the Gnostic Gospels. These books were around, for example: the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Mary Magdalene. Some scholars hold them forth as the great alternative to the canonical gospels, but I think the Church wisely chose to move away from this expression. There are a lot of unsavory elements in the Gnostic gospels, including dualism, the teaching that the body is bad while the soul is good. But also, I'd mention, for those who advocate the Gnostic Gospels as great feminist treatises, that at the end of the Gospel of Thomas, there is a supposed "saying" of Jesus, where the disciples ask him: "Can Mary Magdalene be saved?" And the text has Jesus say: "Well, I will make

her into a man and then she can be saved.”⁴ Well, if that’s feminism, then I’m the Emperor of China. These were texts that were strange and odd, so the Church rightly suspected them.

Fr. Baima: And that’s another problem with doing historical fiction. The author picks and chooses and doesn’t represent the historical material that he is employing in an accurate way. He is selective. If a person wanted, they could go back and read these gospels. By doing so, they would see that this is hardly an exaltation of the feminine.

Fr. Barron: Right. And we should note also the very important historical point that all of the canonical gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) are written prior to the Gnostic Gospels.⁵ The Gnostic Gospels are not somehow more historically accurate. Rather, they represent a divergence from the most ancient sources.⁶

Fr. Baima: That is an important historical fact. The Gnostic Gospels are later divergences from the authentic tradition.

Fr. Barron: Give me the Gospel of Mark any day of the week if you want to know what the historical Jesus was like.

⁴ The actual text reads: “Simon Peter said to them, Let Mary go out from among us, because women are not worthy of the Life. Jesus said: See, I shall lead her, so that I will make her male, that she too may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For every woman who makes herself male will enter the Kingdom.” See *The Gospel According to Thomas: Coptic Text Established and Translated*, A. Guillaumont, H. Ch. Puech, G. Quispel, W. Till and Yassah ‘abd al Masih, trans. (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1959), 57.

⁵ The critical work cited in footnote 4 dates the composition of the Gospel of Thomas to A.D. 140. The usual dating for the New Testament would be A.D. 57 to 67 for Paul’s letters, A.D. 65-70 for the Gospel of Mark, after 70 for Matthew and between 70 and 80 or 85 for Luke. The Gospel of John would be dated between 90 and 100. The Gnostic text in question here, Thomas, would be two generations after the last of the authentic New Testament Gospels.

⁶ According to standard commentaries, the Gnostic Gospels cannot be dated earlier than the middle of the second century (A.D. 150+). See Lucetta Mowry, “Noncanonical Early Christian Writings” in *The Interpreter’s One Volume Commentary on the Bible*, Charles M. Laymon, ed. (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1971), 1146. Regarding the dating of the Gospel of Thomas, scholars date this from the early third century (A.D. 200 +). See Raymond E. Brown, PHEME PERKINS and ANTHONY SALDARINI, “Apocrypha; Dead Sea Scrolls; Other Jewish Literature,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Raymond E. Brown, et al, eds. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), 1067.

Fr. Baima: You did mention Mary Magdalene in the quote from the Gospel of Thomas. Now, Dan Brown makes a great deal out of the figure of Mary Magdalene in this book, *The Da Vinci Code*. Could you talk a little about that?

Fr. Barron: Yes, of course. He sees Mary Magdalene as the Holy Grail. That's the great twist in the book, that Mary Magdalene was the bearer of Christ's own child and that she bore the sacred blood of the Lord. So the whole story really turns on this new sense of the Holy Grail. This is based on all kinds of legends and stories that are fitted together. More directly, it is based on some popular books in the 1970's about the Holy Grail. Is there a foundation for it? No. Can we find any reliable sources of historical evidence? No. Is there every reason to believe it's not true? Yes.

Fr. Baima: So, let's just cut right to the chase: The author of *the Da Vinci Code* asserts that Mary Magdalene married Jesus and bore his children.

Fr. Barron: There is no historical evidence for that. It is based on all sorts of myths and legends fitted together in odd ways. But, here's an observation I make about it. There is a tension, it seems to me, at the very heart of the argument. Let's say, now I want your listeners to know that I don't for one second think this is true. I don't think that Mary Magdalene bore the child of Jesus. But, let's just say for sake of argument that he did. Let's say that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and that they had a child. Would this compromise the divinity of Jesus. The argument in the book is that, yes, of course, it would. It would prove that Jesus was not divine. Well, that's simply not the case. In classical Catholic doctrine concerning Jesus we talk about the coming together of two natures, divine and human, without mixing, mingling or confusion. Let's say that Jesus had had a child, would that mean that he was no longer divine, or not divine

in the first place. No, it wouldn't. Now, turn that around. Let's assume, with Dan Brown, that Jesus was not divine. Let's assume that he was just a first century preacher who married Mary Magdalene and had a child. Here's my question: Why would anyone be interested in that child? Why would anyone be interested in that progeny? The claim is that "this is such an important blood-line that it grounds the kings and queens of France" and that this blood-line must be protected. Why would anyone care? So, if he's not divine, if Jesus is just a wandering 1st century prophet, who cares about his child? So, I think Brown is caught on the horns of a dilemma. He wants to say that because Jesus had a child with Mary Magdalene, therefore he's not divine. It doesn't follow. Even if it followed, why would anyone care? To me there is an odd bit of illogic at the heart of the book and its claims.

Fr. Baima: Let's go back to the actual claims of the Church. Now you can assert what you do believe.

Fr. Barron: First of all, there is no ground for *The Da Vinci Code's* claim whatsoever. According to the Church, Mary Magdalene is presented as a penitent who comes to Jesus and whose life is radically changed. She becomes a great spokesman, indeed, she is declared to be by some of the Eastern Churches "the apostle to the Apostles."⁷ She evangelizes the apostles. She is a great disciple of the Lord. And that's how we should understand Mary Magdalene. In fact, if you want to see her bones, pious tradition holds that they are in the church in Vesele in France. I have seen them several times. There you can venerate the bones of Mary Magdalene and I would strongly recommend it. It has nothing to do with the Holy Grail and Dan Brown's odd fantasy.

⁷ This term is used in the Orthodox services book called *The Menaion*, available in English as *Divine Prayers and Services of the Catholic Orthodox Church of Christ*, Seraphin Nassar, comp., (Englewood, New Jersey: Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese, 1979), 567.

Fr. Baima: Why have so few Catholic's raised their voices in protest against this book? If it's having this anti-Catholic effect that we seem to be seeing, why aren't people talking about it?

Fr. Barron: That does bother me. That's one of the reasons I was happy to come on *Speaking of Theology* and talk with you about it. I think the reason is, to some degree, that we have lost our identity and focus if we can read a book like *The Da Vinci Code* and become so confused. Again it's a good book in terms of readability, I understand that. I enjoyed reading it. It's a fast paced, a thriller. But it does bother me that at the end of this book so few Catholics seem to sense the strong attack against the Church.

Fr. Baima: More than the Church, it is an attack on the essential claims of Christianity.

Fr. Barron: Right, and the fact that Catholic's don't get riled up about that attack is a problem. If we think that Christianity basically comes down to ethical correctness, such that it's good to be a good person, but that's not all there is to Christianity. As you say, it has all sorts of strong doctrinal claims. And on those claims our identity is based. So when a book like this, which is wildly popular, is going after those essential claims, we should raise our voices in protest. We should be concerned about that. And we should be willing and able to defend the claims of the Church.

Fr. Baima: And that's all the time we have today. My thanks to Fr. Robert Barron, professor and chairperson of the Department of Systematic Theology here at the University of St. Mary of the Lake, for sharing his insights with us on this edition of *Speaking of Theology*. *Speaking of Theology* is a monthly program brought to you by the faculty of the University of St. Mary of the Lake / Mundelein Seminary. If you'd like to contact the show, you can reach us on the

internet at speakingoftheology@usml.edu Until next month, I'm Fr. Tom Baima and this has been *Speaking of Theology*.

The Pastoral Problem

An Interview with Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I.

Graziano Marcheschi: In a recent issue of the *Catholic New World* you talk about how Catholic doctrine and faith can easily get lost in a novel like *The Da Vinci Code* which is a runaway best seller across the country. Just to remind our viewers and particularly those that have not read the book that, it's really a mystery novel. As it unfolds, one of the premises is that the Holy Grail is not actually an object but a person who turns out to be Mary Magdalene. Like the Grail carried the blood of Jesus, she carried his blood within her own body in the form of a child that she was alleged to have conceived with Jesus. Why did you write about this book? Why is a novel like this of concern to the Archbishop of Chicago?

Cardinal Francis George: I wrote about *the Da Vinci Code* because a lot of people ask me about it. It is an interesting story taken as a detective story. The problem is that it makes allusions to some things historical and some that are not. One example is the Holy Grail itself, which isn't historical. The Grail is the object of a bunch of legends, having no basis in scripture or history. The Grail is a legend. Also, Brown's book makes allusion to the Gnostic gospels of the second and third centuries. It is important for our viewers to realize that these Gnostic gospels were written after the canonical gospels. These later writings were rejected as not being true gospels because they propose a bizarre picture of Jesus. The book also makes reference to paganism and the pagan gods and goddesses. It makes reference to medieval history and the Knights Templar. On one hand, part of

what makes the book fascinating is the number of references. But the important thing to remember is, it's fiction, the entire story line. Simply making reference to events of history does not make a book a work of history. This is where the pastoral problem can be seen. The book is written in such a plausible way that one can begin to say, "Hey what about this and what about that?" If a person reads the book as a novel, as a work of fiction, there is no pastoral problem. But, if a person approaches it thinking it is an historical account, then, at once there is a problem. The basic problem is that, in terms of the faith, it denies that Jesus is divine. The problem with this was first expressed by Saint Paul, who said it quite well, If Jesus isn't risen from the dead and isn't divine, then we are all fools. So, that's the basic problem: *the Da Vinci Code* denies the divinity of Christ. It distorts the relationship between Christ and his Apostles and constructs a story that Leonardo Da Vinci, as a member of the Priory of Sion, which never existed, and many others, were part of an elaborate plan to hand on the lost knowledge that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene. I would note that Mary Magdalene is a saint of the church. Her feast day is celebrated in July every year. So, when I say that the Da Vinci Code is a pastoral problem, what I mean is that the book distorts the faith in very serious ways. If someone would take the book literally and forget it's a novel, one would lose the Christian faith.

Dr. Marcheschi: But it seems to distort the faith in a plausible way.

Cardinal Francis George: It is engagingly written, so it appears to be plausible.

G. Marcheschi: And from what you are saying this is not simply an attack on the Catholic Church. It really gets at the heart of Christianity.

Cardinal Francis George: Well, if a Christian's basic belief is that Jesus is Lord, as all the Gospels proclaim, and we know that he is Lord in his resurrection from the dead, then it attacks all of Christianity. But the author claims that the vehicle for the deception is the Catholic Church. It's something like the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Remember, that work was the 19th century forgery which says all of human history can be understood if we know that there is a secret group of ten Jews who manipulate us all. They are the ones who bring us into war. They are responsible for the depressions. Everything we think is somebody else's doing is really the work of this small self-perpetuating group of Jews. This secret group is responsible for all of history's ills. That story line is repeated in *the Da Vinci Code*, except in this case the villain is not a group of Jews but turns out to be the Catholic Church. It's the equivalent of this cabal theory, that a small group of powerful Vatican officials are responsible for all of religious history. (And the Vatican is always a great source of interest to people). The book proposes that there has been a constant effort to deceive throughout the centuries until now, at last, there is the chance to uncover the conspiracy and allow people to know the truth.

Dr. Marcheschi: And you almost would have to be a scholar of history, a scholar of scripture, and a scholar of theology to be able to discern what little bits may have some historical fact to them and what things are just invented.

Cardinal Francis George: You don't have to be a great scholar. It is ridiculous to say that Constantine invented the divinity of Christ. Read the Gospels, read the Gospel of Saint John, read the epistles of Saint Paul, all written three centuries before Constantine lived. When somebody comes along and says something like, "Constantine invented the divinity of Christ," I ask, "How dumb can you be?" You don't have to be a great scholar to punch holes in these claims.

Dr. Marcheschi: And Dan Brown does, in fact, say that Constantine invented the doctrine of the divinity of Christ in order to support.

Cardinal Francis George: Why do you suppose the first 30 popes were all martyrs, for God's sake? Do you think it was because they didn't want the world to know that Jesus married Mary Magdalene? This is absurd. Why should anyone go to their death for Jesus as Son of God, as millions have done through the centuries, believing secretly that he wasn't? Why should the Popes themselves have been martyred the way they were? Could it be that they would embrace martyrdom so that the world wouldn't come to know that Jesus was really a married man? Is that plausible? Part of what is at work here is two different views of religion. In the Gnostic version, we don't receive salvation from God. Instead, we have this secret knowledge and these religious experiences which tell us as much as we are ever going to know about God and ourselves. The big difference between the authentic tradition and the second century deviations is between a view of religion that is based upon your own experience and a view of religion that is a response to God's intervention, divine self-revelation. It sorts out on this one point. Most of modern religion turns out to be based upon personal experience substituting for divine revelation. By suggesting that religion is really based on esoteric knowledge and personal experience, Brown makes Gnosticism plausible. The claim is that some small, elite group had some secrets and experiences that they will tell you about if you're worthy. And that seeming plausibility is what, unfortunately, makes the book a good read.

Dr. Marcheschi: It still seems remarkable to me, that thinking Catholics who really ought to know better, are somehow are unsettled by the some of the allegations or some of the implications found in the book. Why do you think that is? Why does *the Da Vinci*

Code not rouse a, “He can’t do that, he can’t say that reaction from the readers?”

Cardinal Francis George: Maybe it is poor catechesis, that people don’t have a good grasp of their faith and their identity in their faith. I don’t know. Whatever the reason, the story scoops you up. As you go along, you want to know what is coming next. It’s only when you step back and discover that the historical references are false, that you say “what in heaven’s name has gone on here?” The Gnostic gospels existed, but they are very anti-feminist. In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus says that Mary Magdalene will be OK because Jesus is making her into a man. That doesn’t sound to me like feminism. What is the sacred feminine? Does it mean my mother was God? The words resonate, but if you stop and think about them, what exactly do they mean? Once you do that, things start to unravel. On its own basis as a detective story, the book stays together. As a detective story, it doesn’t make any truth claims as such, because it’s a novel. However, if you start saying it is historically true, then I have to ask what is the evidence for such a claim? There is no evidence.

Dr. Marcheschi: Maybe some of the attraction is exactly that, the lack of truth claims. When the book proposes these Gnostic gospels as alternatives to the canonical gospels it gives us permission to be much more subjective about the content of the Christian Faith. The Gnostic gospels seem to propose that this is just a matter of symbolism and you find your own subjective truth within those symbols. This way is set against the church which says; no there is objective truth to be found in the Gnostic symbols. Modern society is much less drawn to objective truth.

Cardinal Francis George: Well objective truth means you have to convert. If it is true, you have to change. That is always hard to hear. And because of the demands made by objective truth, a lot of people

would say there is no truth in religion. They would claim that truth is what fits your experience, what fits you, what you like, what is comforting to you. There is a point to what you say. I hadn't thought of it in those terms.

Dr. Marcheschi: Well thank you, Cardinal. It is certainly a fascinating conversation about a book that's captured the imagination of a lot of Americans.

Cardinal Francis George: Unfortunately it has.

Saint Mary Magdalene

An Interview with Michael Fuller

Fr. Baima: Welcome to Speaking of Theology. I'm your host, Father Tom Baima. Greetings from Mundelein Seminary. Today we want to continue a conversation we have been having on previous programs of Speaking of Theology on the popular book, *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown. Last month on the show, Fr. Robert Barron and I discussed the book, which is making quite an impact. It's been on the cover of *Newsweek*; there has been an ABC Special Report about it. But more importantly, as priests who serve in the parishes of the Archdiocese [of Chicago] each weekend, we have been hearing from parishioners a real question, "say more about this book." Many people are reading it. As I said last month, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, which is a trade publication for colleges and universities, has identified it as the number two best seller on college campuses. So, lots of people are talking about this book.

There is a problem with the book, though. It makes a villain out of the Catholic Church and attacks a number of elements of the Christian faith at their core. So what we thought we would do this time is use this program, *Speaking of Theology*, to examine one particular part of *the Da Vinci Code*, and that's the figure and person of Mary Magdalene.

Mary Magdalene figures very prominently in the book. The author contends that she is the Holy Grail that people have sought for centuries, and that knowledge of this secret was suppressed as a great conspiracy by the Catholic Church. There is another view of Mary Magdalene, however, one that knows her as Saint Mary Magdalene. She is called by various church fathers as the "apostle to

the Apostles.” So I thought it would be good to use this edition of *Speaking of Theology* to examine the “other side” and hear just who Mary Magdalene really was in Christian history and how she fits into the Christian tradition. To help us do that, I have invited one of the faculty members of Mundelein Seminary, Father Michael Fuller, to join us for *Speaking of Theology*.

Father Fuller is an instructor of spiritual theology in the Department of Christian Life. He is a doctoral candidate at the Faculty of Theology of the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas in Rome. His book, *The Virgin Martyrs*, is due to be published soon by Hillenbrand Books. And he is a priest of the Diocese of Rockford. I’m very happy to have him here today. Father Fuller, welcome to *Speaking of Theology*.

Fr. Fuller: Thank you very much, Father Baima.

Fr. Baima: Let’s start at the very beginning and this afternoon look at the figure of Mary Magdalene. Who is she? What do we actually know about her?

Fr. Fuller: Mary Magdalene is actually one of my favorite saints precisely because of all these image problems she’s been having over the past 2000 years. Traditionally, Mary Magdalene [as we know her from the Scriptures] is the “apostle to the Apostles”. This is a title given her by Saint Ambrose and others. She is the first witness to the resurrection, as told us in the Gospel of John.

Fr. Baima: And that is why she is given that particular title, “the apostle to the Apostles.” The word “apostle” merely means “messenger” so this is saying that she brought the message of the Resurrection to Peter and the other apostles.

Fr. Fuller: Precisely. So, she is the messenger to the messengers who would go out to the world. This is a very prominent place in the Church and in the whole scheme of Christian life.

Fr. Baima: What we know about her comes from the Scriptures, particularly the Gospel of Luke.

Fr. Fuller: Actually she is mentioned in all four gospels. The earliest is the Gospel of Luke, earliest not in time of writing but in terms of the story from the Tradition. Luke mentions her earliest on in his gospel. And basically, Mary was one of the women who traveled with Jesus. In fact, some people today believe she was one of the financial backers of Jesus, helping him in his ministry. She was also, we are told, healed by Jesus. Jesus cast seven demons out of her. Remember this point as it will become significant later. How the figure of seven demons is interpreted becomes important with the later history of how her story is told.

Fr. Baima: Both the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Mark speak of the exorcism of the seven demons.

Fr. Fuller: Then in John we have the most prominent role of Mary Magdalene, that of witness to the resurrection. She is the first to see Jesus after he rises from the dead. And she is sent out [by Jesus] to tell the apostles about it.

Fr. Baima: For the sake of our listeners who may not be familiar with the text, this is the situation where early in the morning on the first day of the week, Mary goes to the tomb with spices to anoint the body of Jesus, as was the custom.

Fr. Fuller: And those oils were very important to the story as we will see. They contribute to the confusion.

Fr. Baima: So, she goes to the tomb to anoint Jesus, but the tomb is empty. Grief stricken, she is wandering around the garden where the tomb was and she encounters the Resurrected Jesus, but she doesn't recognize him.

Fr. Fuller: No, at first she thinks that he is the gardener. And she asks him "Where did you take the body of Christ." Finally, she realizes [who it is] and sees Jesus as he says her name. Her response is "Rabboni" [Hebrew for] Teacher, Lord. And she discovers that Christ is no longer dead.

Fr. Baima: And at that point he gives her the mission to go and tell the disciples

Fr. Fuller: "Go and tell Peter and the others that I have risen and that I will meet them in Galilee . . ."8

Fr. Baima: That is the sense in which she is the first witness to the resurrection. She is given the mandate to bring the message to the apostles.

Fr. Fuller: This is very important to note. One reason for all the interest in *the Da Vinci Code* is that it employs a very feminist view of history and Christianity. I think Father Barron mentioned this point

8 Matthew 28:1-7 reads: Now after the sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulchre. And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone, and sat upon it. His appearance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. Lo, I have told you." So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Hail!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me." John 20:17-18 says: Jesus said to her, "Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Mary Magdalene went and said to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. (RSV)

on your last show. It is important for our audience to know both that the book has this bias and the church has never denied the prominent role of messenger which Mary Magdalene has in the scriptures. She is the apostle to the apostles and the first witness of the resurrection. So, the claim that her role in the group of disciples was covered up is not true. Her story is read publicly each year in the Easter Gospels.

Fr. Baima: And from an historical perspective, the prominence that Mary Magdalene has in the gospel texts themselves is quite counter-cultural for the first century.

Fr. Fuller: Right. Why would that position, as first witness to the resurrection, be given to a woman, in a society that was all male dominated? That is a reversal of what would have been socially acceptable. It's the same case in the gospels where the genealogies of Christ mention not only men in the lineage, but also several women.

Fr. Baima: So, the fact is that the canonical writings honor women in a way that the dominant society would not have done.

Fr. Fuller: Yes, exactly. But that is ignored by some people when you bring the topic up.

Fr. Baima: In the book, Dan Brown tells his in a way that seems like historical fiction. Historical fiction is a genre where you take an historical story and then write a piece of fiction using the characters out of history. I happen to like that kind of story . . .

Fr. Fuller: It makes history interesting.

Fr. Baima: The problem in the case of the Da Vinci Code, is that it really isn't historical fiction. This is not a case of an author taking an historical story and writing fiction by using characters of the actual

events. Rather, it is pure fiction, using historical figures in ways which bear no relationship to actual history. The result that I am finding by talking to parishioners out in the parishes, is that since they are not aware of the ancient history, the way we who have studied theology would be, is that they are not able to separate the facts of history from the fiction of the story. This is causing confusion. So, maybe, we can take a look at the real facts. In the book, Dan Brown makes the contention that there was a plot to cover up Mary Magdalene's true role. He says that one of the pieces of evidence of this plot is that the Church labeled her as a prostitute, as a way of degrading her position. Now, it is true that there is some confusion between Mary and the woman caught in adultery. Could we go right to the heart of the matter and unpack the facts? Where was the confusion over these two women on the part of the church even at the highest levels? How do the facts shake out if you study it?

Fr. Fuller: A little background first. Traditionally, Mary Magdalene has been described in hagiography, in the stories of the saints, as a reformed prostitute, as a lady who was healed of this by Christ and who went on to be a follower of Christ. So, traditionally in art and iconography, she is always depicted with the skull, the sign of a penitent. She is reformed, but she is always remembering her sins and how Christ has forgiven her.

Fr. Baima: The role that such images had in Christian art was to depict the tremendous power that Christ had to elevate the sinner [to sanctity].

Fr. Fuller: The idea is that if God could save this prostitute, he can save any of us.

Fr. Baima: What was the source of the confusion?

Fr. Fuller: Most people who support this idea claim that Pope Gregory the Great announced that Mary Magdalene was the prostitute who reformed. That's simply not the case. Gregory the Great did make a huge mistake. What he did was to confuse the three different women named Mary. The first Mary is Mary Magdalene. All we know about her is that Christ cast seven demons out of her and that she became a disciple. What those demons were, or what the sin was, we don't know. A lot of people equate the mention of demons with illness. We just don't know.

Fr. Baima: Sometimes, it was also a psychological disturbance.

Fr. Fuller: Right. Then there is Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus and Martha which gives us the whole famous Martha and Mary story. Now the problem comes with the Gospel of John, where the [evangelist] clearly identifies a woman that Luke does not name who comes to Jesus and anoints his feet with oil and cleans his feet with her tears and wipes them with her hair. The Gospel of John says that woman is Mary of Bethany. The mistake that Gregory the Great made was in two homilies, at two different times, when he equated all three people: the sinner, the woman who anointed Jesus feet, (Mary of Bethany) and Mary Magdalene. Now, it's easy to get confused and you can see why. In those times the texts of the scriptures themselves were not readily available; they were rare objects. So, a lot of the preaching was done from memory. What Gregory seems to have done was to equate all three Mary's as one person.

Fr. Baima: And no one at this period of history has a surname. Surnames have not yet been invented.

Fr. Fuller: Right, Mary Magdalene is really Mary of Magdala, which is the name of the town she came from. So, Gregory the Great said, we have this woman who is Lazarus' sister, who anointed Jesus' feet

and this is where this confusion begins. A further problem, though, is that people think that Gregory said that she was a prostitute. What happened there was in the Gospel of Luke, where the woman who anointed the feet of Jesus was called a great sinner. Indeed she was a woman who had a bad name in town. That's how the Jerusalem Bible translated it. What does that mean? We don't know. But a bad name in town would mean she was a bad character, someone who walked around and did things which are associated with bad people. Gregory the Great never said that she was a prostitute, just a sinner. Someone else later figured she was a prostitute and linked the two. What seems to have happened is at the same time that Gregory was preaching about Mary another saint's story was in vogue, that was Mary of Egypt. Mary of Egypt was a woman of Alexandria who was a prostitute. She was a Christian, raised in a Christian family who fell into the life of disrepute. She heard about people going on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and venerating the Cross. She wanted to go, but didn't have any money so she sold her body to the sailors so that she could get passage to Jerusalem. But in Jerusalem when she tried to enter the church where the Holy Cross was, she was barred by an invisible force. As she tried to go in the door, it's just like in the movies, she bounces back. She can't get in. So she wonders to herself, how can this be? So she prays to Mary the Mother of God that she can change her life and with that conversion, she is able to enter the church. Once she venerates the Cross, she receives a message from the Lord to go into the desert and become a hermit. Mary of Egypt becomes one of the original mothers of the desert. Out there she reforms her life and spends thirty or forty years as a hermit. A priest comes and finds her, not knowing who she was, brings her communion and shortly later she dies. This story was very popular right at the same time that Gregory the Great was preaching on Mary Magdalene. So with yet another Mary added to the mix, in a totally oral culture, confusion resulted. In the popular piety, it all just became one story. That's how, I believe, Mary Magdalene was labeled a prostitute. It is

nothing that Gregory the Great actually said, but the mixture of the several Marys in the popular piety brought about that result.

Fr. Baima: Did Gregory write his homilies down, or like many of the early preachers were they copied by others?

Fr. Fuller: I don't know for sure, but often homilies were copied. . .

Fr. Baima: I can imagine what my homilies would look like if someone copied them out in the pews.

Fr. Fuller: I don't recommend it. The other thing to remember is that Gregory the Great's homilies were very, very popular. They were circulated as a very good source of theology. So they were one the few things that people read and listened to their teachers talk about.

Fr. Baima: Then the confusion in Gregory's homilies created a confusion in the popular mind of the day.

I'd like to go on to one of Dan Brown's points in *the Da Vinci Code*, that there was a cover up of Mary's true identity. Can you talk a little bit about the so called cover up?

Fr. Fuller: Confusion is not cover up. You had the homilies where Gregory clearly which say that Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany and the lady who was a sinner and anointed Jesus' feet are all the same person. This was propagated outward by people reading and quoting his sermons. Confusion is far different from the Church announcing that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. It is a difference between church pronouncement and popular religiosity.

Fr. Baima: All this occurred during a period of history where everything is transacted orally. So the oral tradition, which we seen in the lives of the saints could sometimes mix up the details. We see

this often in the accounts of the lives of the saints, where details from one story find their way into another.

Fr. Fuller: It's the telephone game all over.

Fr. Baima: The church tried to address this officially during the time of the Second Vatican Council. It was Pope Paul VI, was it not, who tried to correct the errors and confusions that had crept into the accounts of the lives of the saints?

Fr. Fuller: Exactly, in 1969 came the publication of the final revision of the Roman Calendar, which removed saints, like Christopher, whose legends are not historically accurate, but composites of elements of other saints lives. Mary Magdalene was clearly established as the woman of the resurrection gospels and given a feast day distinct from Mary of Egypt and Mary of Bethany. This was the official response or clarification. Unfortunately, the popular notions of piety just continued on. What we need to remember is that any changes that Gregory the Great made in the story of Mary wasn't for reasons of patriarchy, as some feminist theologians and especially Dan Brown suggest. Gregory was trying to make a theological point about Jesus Christ's ability to forgive everyone.

The point of the narrative is to show that Christ could save even the worst of sinners and bring her to the most prominent point of being first witness of the resurrection. There is hope for us all.

Fr. Baima: So historically it was the opposite of what Brown asserts. The purpose of the sermons, (even granting that he confused the two Marys), was not to reduce the figure of Mary Magdalene to that of a sinner, but to take the figure of the sinner, and elevate her to the position of Mary Magdalene, the first witness of the resurrection.

Let me change topics now, and ask you, what is the conspiracy about the bloodline? Where does that come from?

Fr. Fuller: Where? I guess I'd have to say from all over the place. There are legends after legends. I think at the root of it is the idea that we are always constantly trying to mold Christ into our image rather the opposite. The way it should be is that we are molded into Christ's image. So, to follow out the logic, the fact that Christ was celibate just doesn't seem right. Most people get married. It's the natural thing to do. So, if we use our experience as the starting point, it would seem to be natural for Christ to get married. If it were logical for Christ to have married, continuing this line of reasoning, then the next question would be who would he have married? In the gospels, Mary is the most prevalent name, she was close to Christ. In fact, the Gnostic Gospels, exploit that closeness saying that Mary was the recipient of the special revelation because she was so close to Christ. But again those gospels, have been rejected by the church.

Fr. Baima: These so-called gospels came out of the very heresies which denied the full divinity and the full humanity of Christ. All of the confusion about Christ comes from trying to make more either of his divinity or his humanity, not allowing both to exist fully.

Fr. Fuller: And if you want to stress the "full human" part, then he has got to get married. That is the logical conclusion based on human experience. But as anyone who has taken Logic 101 knows, something can be logical and not the least bit true. Just because something is logical, doesn't make it true. So there are lots of weird stories that are attached to these legends about a bloodline. One of my favorites is that Mary was with child from Jesus at the time of the crucifixion, after the crucifixion she fled to Egypt where her child was born and her child was named Sarah. And then the two of them went off to Europe. In a strange twist of logic, because Sarah was born in Egypt they have a feeling she is the source for the Black Madonna. This icon is really a painting of Mary the Mother of God.

Fr. Baima: So, the confusion in one legend leads to confusion in another.

Fr. Fuller: The logic of that particular one just escapes me. To be born in Egypt does not make a person black, especially if the parents were Jewish. The confusion gets really out there. Regarding the conspiracy, it goes something like this: obviously Mary Magdalene must have been really close to Christ and how could they have not fallen in love, and so that is where those legends started and they have always been rejected by the Church. Their rejection by the Church gives the conspiracy theorists what they need to claim a cover up.

Fr. Baima: But, these particular legends emerge hundreds of year after the first gospel accounts.

Fr. Fuller: The legends are much later than even the Gnostic Gospels. They really don't emerge until we are approaching the time of the Reformation.

Fr. Baima: So we are talking 1500-1600 years after the event in question. There is no historical evidence prior to that.

Fr. Fuller: None that I can find. There are places in the Gnostic Gospels, which say that Mary Magdalene kissed Jesus on the mouth. These texts were written in the 120's or 130's.

Fr. Baima: So that is 90-100 years after the events that they are writing about.

Fr. Fuller: That is the closest. None of them, as far as I can tell, actually say that Mary Magdalene married Christ or even had a child. The most they say is that Mary kissed him on the mouth. So, even if you take the source as it is, you don't arrive at the conclusion that

Jesus married Mary Magdalene. Actually, there is a greater legend from the early church that Mary Magdalene was betrothed to John the Evangelist. As this legend goes, John met Christ and decided to break off his marriage to Mary Magdalene. As a result, again according to the legend, it was because of that breakup she fell into a life of prostitution.

Fr. Baima: That must come with a later period. So, yet another confusion, another tale or legend.

Fr. Fuller: There are hundreds and thousands of these little legends out there which are just not accurate. The only thing we can say about Mary Magdalene is that she was this witness to the resurrection.

Fr. Baima: And clearly, Mary Magdalene was in the inner circle of Christ's followers. She had a prominent place in the community of disciples, and is a Saint of the Church. And, with that, we will have to end.

Thank you, Father Fuller, for joining me for *Speaking of Theology*. Thank you to our listeners as well. *Speaking of Theology* is a monthly program brought to you by the University of Saint Mary of the Lake / Mundelein Seminary. If you would like to contact the program we are on the web speakingoftheology@usml.edu. Thank you for listening. I'm Father Tom Baima and this has been *Speaking of Theology*.

The Gnostics

An Interview with Agnes Cunningham, S.S.C.M.

Fr. Baima: Good morning, greetings from Mundelein Seminary. Today we are going to continue our discussion of the issues that are all around the news about Gnosticism, the Jesus Code, [the Lost Gospels] & *the Da Vinci Code*.

We want to examine the early Christian literature that is being discussed in various news magazines and articles. To help us do this today, I have invited Sister Agnes Cunningham to be our guest on *Speaking of Theology*. Sister Agnes is a member of the Sisters of the Holy Heart of Mary and is currently the superior of the Holy Heart of Mary Convent in Champaign, IL. She is professor emeritus of historical and systematic theology at the University of Saint Mary of the Lake. Sister Agnes was the first woman president of the Catholic Theological Society of America. Her doctorate is from the *Institut Catholique de Lyon*. Sister Agnes, welcome to *Speaking of Theology*.

Sister Agnes: Well, thank you Fr. Thomas Baima, it is very good to be with you this morning.

Fr. Baima: I will have to confess to our listeners, Sister Agnes was one of my teachers when I was a graduate student at USML a few years ago.

Sister Agnes: He is one of my claims to fame.

Fr. Baima: Well, let's jump right into the questions. [A] few weeks ago now, both *US News and World Report* and *Time* magazine carried cover stories on this phenomenon that has been going all through the news about the rediscovery of ancient Christian literature.⁹ Titled under "the lost Gospels" or the "Jesus Code" were the two different cover stories. So, what I thought would be helpful to our listeners this morning is to talk a little bit about this literature. Maybe we could start with a survey of the early Christian literature. The writings that are mentioned the most often in these news stories are these so called "lost" gospels. What are the lost gospels and where do they come from?

Sister Agnes: Well, Fr. Tom, before I answer that question, I would like to give a brief summary of two reactions to that article. The first is that I wonder how many people who had read that article had read the review of Ehrman's other book, *Lost Scriptures: Books that did not make it into the New Testament*.¹⁰ That was carried in the *America* magazine December 22-December 29 and the review of the book was written by Fr. Daniel J. Harrington who is a professor of New Testament in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at the Weston School of Theology and editor of *New Testament Abstracts*. And I think that Fr. Harrington's reading of that book and his assessment of it gives a good compliment and balance to the article in *Time*.¹¹

Fr. Baima: Why don't you give us a quick summary of Fr. Harrington's survey of the books.

9 For the context of this program, see David van Biema, "The Lost Gospels" in *Time Magazine*, December 22, 2003. See also Linda Kulman and Jay Tolson, "Jesus in America" in *U. S. News and World Report*, December 22, 2003.

10 Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books That Did Not Make It Into The New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

11 Daniel J. Harrington, "A Clash of Ideas and Beliefs": Review of *Lost Scriptures: The Books That Didn't Make It Into the New Testament* and *Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scriptures and Faiths We Never Knew*, by Bart D. Ehrman in *America Magazine*, December 22, 2003.

Sister Agnes: What he does is contrast what Professor Ehrman said in *Lost Christianities* to what is said in *Lost Scriptures*. In the *Lost Scriptures*, Ehrman includes text. In fact, Fr. Harrington says, that book is almost an anthology of translations of 43 texts from not only the Gnostic Gospel but the Apocryphal Gospel and other kinds of writings that did emerge in the very exciting interesting time of the early Christian Church. What Harrington says is that you have to balance off Ehrman's claim for what he calls the "movement of Proto Orthodoxy," where the church is suppose to have suppressed and hidden so many of these non-canonical texts, and the actual complicated and unsettled evolution that was going on in Christianity in those early centuries. So, that's just a very thumbnail sketch. The second reaction was that I remember when I was a little girl, a freshman in high school; someone gave me a copy of these supposed lost gospels. When I was a young sister teaching high-school at the age of 20 or 30-something, somebody gave me another copy. So, this is not a new phenomenon claiming that they have been suppressed until the year 2003. These texts keep emerging. One of the reasons these supposed or alleged lost gospels did emerge or were not suppressed is that so many of the other writers in those early Christian centuries the period of what we call the period of Christian antiquity were quoting this material so they could contrast it with the teachings that were coming from the Great Tradition. I think every 25-30 years there is a "new" rediscovery of these lost gospels.

Fr. Baima: I was talking with some women after a lecture I had given in a parish and they had all read *the Da Vinci Code* and they were really quite intrigued. They said they had never heard anything about these books. I said to one of them, "would you like to see these texts? We have them in the library." And that astonished her because she had gotten the impression from the popular reporting that somehow that just 6 or 7 weeks ago there had been this great earth-shattering discovery that no one had known about for 2000

years. So, I said, “You can go to the library and you can take it out and read it. They have been translated for many years.” This was quite stunning to her, to learn that the books weren’t as secret or newly discovered as it was presented in the popular press.

Sister Agnes: To give some context to your listeners, the time we are talking about, that period of early Christianity, begins shortly after A.D. 96 and runs through the middle end of the fourth century, although we do find, even in the later fourth century, some of the great Greek Fathers of the Church writing about the Gnostic gospels even in that period.

The Apocryphal gospels were also coming to the fore and many of them were not Gnostic. If we try to resituate ourselves into the very exciting period, after the death of Jesus and the last Apostle, when the Christian community was trying to deal with the great mysteries of Trinity and incarnation and redemption and all those other wonderful foundational truths of our Catholic faith, nothing was said or settled. There was a great deal of searching going on. The Apostolic Tradition was there, the gospels were being proclaimed orally and then being written; Paul’s epistles and writings were available to people and there were a number of debates going on. The thinkers, the leaders, the bishops, the theologians were trying to find ways of expressing the mysteries, particularly of the incarnation (the mystery of God made man), Jesus, who was human and divine. They were trying to find ways of expressing these truths, in ways that would make sense to intelligent groups of the day.

Fr. Baima: Sister Agnes, we were talking about the formation of early Christian literature. Again, to put some dates on it, the traditional date of the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus is A.D. 33. The apostles go out after that time. They proclaim the gospel. They form Christian communities. But the transmission of Jesus’ teaching was essentially oral. In the 50’s give or take, St. Paul

begins to write letters to the various church's which he's founded. Then in the 70's and 80's you have the Evangelists beginning to put down in written form, the gospel accounts which we come to know as the four gospels. Then, this period of early Christian literature really begins with the death of the last apostle traditionally dated as around A.D. 100 with the death of Saint John. Do I have that historical sequence correct?

Sister Agnes: Yes. That's exactly the way it was, Fr. Thomas. At the same time, that there were emerging wonderfully rich theological text and searching's to find ways of speaking of the great mysteries, there were the people who didn't know Egyptian mythology and Jewish cabala and Oriental theosophy and Greek philosophy. They were asking the same questions. What did it mean that we can say God is one? So, you find texts coming from people who do not use their own names as authors on the text but ascribe them to Paul or Peter or Thomas or Philip or one of the other apostles even to Mary or Joseph and they try to answer questions. What did it mean for Jesus to be human? What did it mean for Jesus to be divine? These were attempts to nourish the devotion to what we would call the simple Christian people who were not dealing with the more profound aspects of Christian faith. It's out of that turmoil and searching that these so-called lost gospels emerge. We have them in the apocryphal gospels; we have them in the Gnostic writings. The Gnostic writings, though, seem to come from a more intellectually astute and insightful level.

Fr. Baima: Let's take a few minutes, then, on the article in *Time* magazine, which mentions four early communities that produced some of this literature. Let's talk about each of these four. The first one that the article mentions is a group called the Ebonites.

Sister Agnes: The Ebonites represent one of the tensions in early Christianity. In other words, how are people who have been Jewish

people and converted to Christianity going to maintain what they feel they must do to be faithful to the long tradition (Judaism) that has brought them to a new insight of faith and still be Christians? We find them trying to be “Jewish Christians” so to speak or “Christian Jews.” In some instances, what they do is bring into their teachings the kind of merger/mixer of both Jewish faith and belief in practice and Christian belief and practice. In the attempt to do it, they are not successful in staying faithful to that apostolic tradition.

Fr. Baima: A different response to the very same tension would be the Marcionites. In their struggle, they come up with the exact opposite answer?

Sister Agnes: Exactly. That happens so often with these alternative Christianities or complimentary Christianities. So often, one is a reaction not to the main line of Christian life and thought but to an opposing Christianity that seems to strike at the roots of what the new group is talking about. Because the Marcionites wanted nothing to do with Judaism, their answer was to suppress the Old Testament. They tried to set up the idea that the Jewish God was one of anger and stern justice and it was only in trying to follow the new way of Jesus that a person could really come to see what Christianity was about.

Fr. Baima: Now, in a certain sense, both of these groups are dealing with the tension that was addressed by the canonical Gospel of Matthew. Would that be fair to say that Matthew really looks at the Jewishness of Christianity and provides the apostolic tradition’s presentation on that question?

Sister Agnes: Yes, that is exactly so. We do find evidences at this period of so-called scriptures or real scriptures that emerge where anything that seems to downplay or seems to be a criticism of the Jewish tradition is extricated. On the other hand anything that

condemns Judaism is taken out or, in other instances anything that condemns Judaism is left in.

Fr. Baima: So, a kind of over emphasis takes place. Here are some things which are important for our listeners to understand. The Canonical gospels (which are those that are listed in the New Testament) are each written in response to a pastoral situation that that particular apostle or evangelist was trying to address for his community. Matthew was addressing this question of the Jewish origins of Christianity. But there were other groups as well. The Gnostics and the Thomaites. Say a little bit about those two groups.

Sister Agnes: Well actually, Fr. Thomas, the Gnostics are perceived as being the most dangerous of all these groups, because Gnosticism was a very subtle system. It subtly appealed to persons who were intellectuals, who were truly seeking a spiritual way, who were asking; how do we know the answers to all these difficulties. They were asking sincere questions that we still ask today. What is the origin of the world, of evil, of the end of the world? How does heaven relate to the earth? How does spirit relate to matter? Gnosticism was dangerous not so much because there were so many errors in it but because there were so many grains of truth.

Fr. Baima: That's usually the situation with heresy. You said many times that the real danger in these other movements in early Christianity was not that they were completely false but that they had taken elements of the truth and turned them and twisted them into falsehood.

Sister Agnes: Yes, and in the doing, they offered a very attractive refuge from the simplicity of the gospel, from the demands of Christian discipleship and from the Church's commitment to serve the poor and proclaim the gospel. Because in the Gnostic sects, you didn't have to do those things; all you had to do was to know and to

possess secret knowledge. That secret knowledge would use terms that were found in the Canonical New Testament but change the meaning. One example is the term “gnosis” itself. Gnosis is the Greek word for knowledge. It is a major concept used by Saint Paul. When Paul uses the term, he means the knowledge of Jesus Christ, true God and true man; the knowledge of the Father of Jesus revealed in the message of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. This was the public revelation. But that was not at all what the Gnostics would say “gnosis” was. For them it was secret knowledge. One of the other dangers in Gnosticism was very subtly expressed in the denial of universal salvation. The Gnostics identified those people who would surely be saved and those people who surely would be damned to hell and some who might be saved if they turned their lives around sought secret knowledge and followed one of the Gnostics schools could perhaps achieve a kind of salvation. It is this attitude that we find when we look into Gnosticism and the Gnostic teachers. I’ve been surprised too that no where in the reading I’ve done about the present discussion and debate that is going on is there any mention of the great Clement of Alexandria who tried himself to take what he saw as the best of Gnosticism and to construct what he truly called a Christian Gnosticism. Nobody seems to have heard of dear Clement. I think he is one of the lost writers.

Fr. Baima: And one of the really great writers of Christian history.

Sister Agnes: And one of the early true scholars and humanists.

Fr. Baima: I mentioned earlier about the Ebonites and Marcionites being an alternative to the Gospel of Matthew on the question of Christian origins and Judaism. In another sense, the Gospel of John and the First Letter of John really are responses to the Gnostic issues that were current at his time.

Sister Agnes: Yes, and you know Fr. Thomas, because of that very focus in those writings, there are evidences that some early Christians, (non-Catholic Christians) for many years would not accept those writings in their bible because they identified John as a Gnostic. They felt that because he was using terms and expressions similar to the Gnostics that he himself was a Gnostic. That is a whole other twist on this discussion that is usually not well known.

Fr. Baima: I want to shift gears quickly because we are coming to the end of the program. In the *Time Magazine* article there was a pull quote, which said many people who have left the church and some that are still in it are looking for another way of being Christian. This goes back, Sister Agnes, to what you said earlier, about how the Gnostics and other heretical groups were not *completely* wrong, that they had taken an element of the truth and then exploited it. Let's assume the pastoral question, there are people who are looking for spirituality. They are looking to have spiritual needs met, but they're not finding it in the ordinary Church practice right now. What would you suggest to them? If they find themselves attracted to this alternative text, what would you suggest for them within the Catholic Tradition?

Sister Agnes: We have a wonderful tradition of spirituality and mysticism in the Catholic Church. Many of these authors are not nearly as well known as they ought to be. But happily and fortunately there are more and more editions, new translations and volumes & books that are coming out.¹² There is a whole little series on 30 days with a spiritual master. And some of the great spiritual pioneers, you might even say, the pioneers of the spirit, who have searched out these yearnings of the human heart and have suggested ways that they have found helpful in deepening their prayer life and establishing a closer knowledge and relationship with God. They key

¹² One such series is the *Classics of Western Spirituality* published by Paulist Press.

of Catholic spirituality is coming to know Jesus is the center of your life.

Fr. Baima: We're going to have to come to the end here. I want to thank Sister Agnes Cunningham for spending the time with us today to talk about early Christian literature. *Speaking of Theology* is a monthly program brought to you by the faculty of University of Saint Mary of the Lake, Mundelein Seminary. We're very grateful to the Archdiocese of Chicago for providing this spot in *Catholic Community of Faith* radio series for us to explore the Catholic intellectual life. If you would like to contact the show you can do that on the Archdiocese of Chicago's webpage, www.archchicago.org Until next time, I'm Father Tom Baima and this has been *Speaking of Theology*.

The Sacred Feminine in Christianity

An Interview with James Presta

Fr. Baima: Greetings from Mundelein Seminary. I'm Fr. Tom Baima, your host for *Speaking of Theology*. My guest today on the program is the Very Reverend James Presta. Fr. Presta is a priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago and Rector / President of St. Joseph College Seminary at Loyola University Chicago. He also serves as lecturer in the area of Christian Theology, sacraments, New Testament studies and Mariology. It's because of his expertise in this last area that I invited him to join us on the show today. Fr. Presta is much sought after as a retreat director and a lecturer to parishes here in the Archdiocese of Chicago. He holds a bachelor of science in psychology from Loyola University; master of divinity and licentiate in sacred theology from the University of Saint Mary of the Lake and a doctorate in sacred theology with a concentration in Marian studies from the University of Dayton and the Pontifical Faculty Marianum in Rome. Fr. Presta is also a member of the Mariological Association of America. Fr. Presta, welcome to *Speaking of Theology*.

Fr. Presta: Thank you Fr. Baima, it is great to be with you.

Fr. Baima: I should also mention that Fr. Presta also is the host of another program on Catholic Community of Faith, the program of *From St. Joseph Seminary*.

Fr. Presta: That's correct. On every other Friday. First Friday, on the Catholic Community of Faith is the program that we sponsor. Every other month there is also a show from Archbishop Quigley Preparatory Seminary: the high school seminary of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

Fr. Baima: So it's easily possible that our listeners will hear you today on St. Joseph's program following *Speaking of Theology*.

Fr. Presta: It's possible, actually this week Fr. Maddock, our director of spiritual life this week will be featured with one of our students.

Fr. Baima: So it's always good to have another one of the Archdiocese's radio hosts on *Speaking of Theology*. So, what do we want to do today? We have been talking over the last few months about the religious issues that have surrounded or been raised up by Dan Brown's book *The Da Vinci Code*. One of the issues I'm hearing a lot about in parishes is that the whole matter of the feminine dimension of religion, which Brown calls the sacred feminine. So, I thought it would be worth while to devote our time on *Speaking of Theology* today to explore the feminine dimension of Christianity. In a particular way, I want to focus on Mariology and explore with you the place of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Catholic history, art, piety and worship. For that reason I was so happy that you agreed to join us since this is your main area of study, when you're not administering the college seminary, is Mariology. Maybe we could just start out and see how far we can get in the course of our time this morning. Let me start with a question: How early do we see Marian piety emerge in Christian history?

Fr. Presta: Well, certainly from the scriptures themselves. We can look a reference in St. Paul in Galatians 4:4 that refers to Mary, and certainly in the Gospels themselves, we already begin to see that Mary obviously takes a role in the story of salvation. She certainly had a place in the life of the early Church. I would say that immediately following the writing of the Gospels, you would see her in the next period, the Patristic period. The Church Father's certainly dwell on Mary, for example, in the idea of Mary as the new Eve. This would be a particular theme that some of the early Church Father's

would use. After that, we next see the baptismal creeds. The Nicene Creed refers to Mary where it says that is Jesus born of the Virgin. Of course, all of the references are always Christological; they are obviously tied to Jesus Christ. That's where Mary obviously gains her importance as the God-bearer. She is the one who gives physical birth to the Savior, as well as playing a very prominent role in the birth of the early Church. So, I would say that from the very beginning, there is plenty of evidence that Mary has a prominent role. Devotion to Mary has already begun in the prayer of the early Church. I believe it is the Coptic (Egyptian) church from about the 3rd century the *Sub Tuum* prayer; "we fly to your protection O Virgin of Virgins." Obviously this is an example of deep supplication by the early Christians for the assistance of the Blessed Mother. So I would say there is plenty of evidence that she had a role in the early Church from the very beginning.

Fr. Baima: I had Sr. Agnes Cunningham one of our professors emeritus on the program. In her classes, she always would make the point that anything we say about Mariology is ultimately a statement about Christology. And as a consequence, when we talk about Mary, we are not just talking about an exalted woman, or a great saint, but about somebody who had a role in the history of salvation. Tell our listeners a little bit about that dimension of Mary's place in the Church.

Fr. Presta: That is so true and I would like to use the word, unique. She has the unique role of being the Mother of God. No other saint in the Church, even some of the greatest of the saints, can make that claim. Mary's role is unique and obviously privileged because she was chosen to be the mother of the Savior. That role has all kinds of implications in terms of salvation history and in terms of theology itself. We not only give Mary the title, Mother of the Lord but we eventually, centuries later, we give her the title of Mother of the Church. This was declared officially in 1964 by Pope Paul VI.

Nonetheless, it gives our listeners an idea of the prominence that Mary plays in the Church throughout history.

Fr. Baima: The significance is that when we say that Mary had a role in salvation history, this is not just something constructed out of piety. This is actually related to the historic events that brought about our salvation. So the word, *unique*, is perfectly appropriate because no other saint has that exact place. The other thing that strikes me, when I hear criticisms of the Catholic Church such as we find in *The Da Vinci Code*, of trying to somehow exclude the feminine dimension from religion, is that here right in our doctrine, in the very moments of doctrinal development in the fourth century that Dan Brown criticizes in his book, is this truth that a woman had a unique roll in bringing about the very events of human salvation. Readers of *The Da Vinci Code* have to see the whole picture, the real history, and not Brown's fictional construction. One of the other things that figures so prominently in the book and which give it the veneer of historical fiction is what Brown does with architecture. I know when I studied Rome, one of my great discoveries, was the age of buildings. Being an American and coming from a country where houses are younger than the people who live in them and then going to Rome and living in a house that was built in 1600 and referred to in the neighborhood as one of the new buildings, gave me a whole different approach to architecture. So, I want to ask you then; when were church buildings first dedicated to Mary?

Fr. Presta: Well, at least in the Western Church, the one we are most aware of and obviously has a great prominence not only in the City of Rome but also for the Church universal is St. Mary Major. That Church was built probably about fifth century, sometime after the Council of Ephesus when Mary was declared to be *Theotokos* (the God-Bearer) or as we say in English, *the Mother of God*. In a sense, to elevate and remember and venerate that sacred moment and the declaration of such an important event, Church of Saint Mary Major was erected to give honor and praise to Mary, always glorifying God ultimately, but in veneration of his Mother.

Fr. Baima: I'd like to ask you to explain to our listeners about Mary being declared to be *Theotokos*; God-Bearer. Some people have the notion that when a council declares something a doctrine, that the council invented a new teaching. In my reading of Church history, what councils do is make judgments between different formulations and choose the one that is the most authentic to the ancient tradition. Could you say a little bit about how that happened in the case of the title, *Theotokos*?

Fr. Presta: Certainly what you say is true. The council met is to clarify for the faithful exactly what the Church taught the wording is obviously of utmost importance in making those definitions. In terms of the Council of Ephesus, the primary argument was whether Mary could be called the God-Bearer or whether she could only be called the Christ-Bearer? You see there was certainly no argument that Mary was the Mother of the physical Jesus, but, could we also say that a woman could bear God? I think that's where the argument began. You might say that the Council of Ephesus made the judgment to call Mary the *Theotokos* rather than the *Christotokos*. Obviously, as the Church Father's debated these questions, faith was working in them. They authentically declared what was the lived reality in the beliefs of people. I think that with the help of the Holy Spirit the expression of our doctrine comes to fruition. We begin to see the Church able to define these important doctrines and teachings. That's what happened at the Council of Ephesus.

Fr. Baima: I want to take us back to something Fr. Bob Barron said on an earlier show. I can imagine some of our listeners driving in their car and saying to themselves, “Theotokus, Christotokus, who cares”? What is the consequence of this in my life? Fr. Barron made the important point that it really all goes back to who is Jesus? If Jesus is not God and man, if the divine-human union hasn’t taken place in him, then everything we say about salvation is meaningless. Because if that were so, if Jesus did not have the ability to heal the separation between God and humanity, then he would have just been a great teacher or philosopher, but not the incarnate Son of God. These statements about Mary immediately reflect back to statements about Jesus. Dan Brown, in *The Da Vinci Code*, casts it as though Constantine invented the divinity of Jesus sometime in the fourth century. But Fr. Barron asked the question rather pointedly. If that is true, who in the world would care who Jesus married? If he was just a prophet, just a first century teacher, who cares? So while these very technical terms of Greek theology make our head spin, they’re terribly important. Mistakes in doctrine are felt at the level of people’s piety. The simple people knew that it made a difference if you didn’t allow Mary the title of Mother of God. If she was not the Mother of God, it demoted Jesus and that put the whole enterprise at risk.

Fr. Presta: We have a saying in this field, “the study of the sacred scriptures is the soul of Mariology.” We have to look first at what is said of her in the scriptures. That becomes of utmost importance. Right along side the scriptures is the tradition, the lived reality as you said of who Mary is and who she has become for the Christian people. Again, this is not invented but aligned and in relationship to who Jesus is. There is no such thing as Mariology without Christology. In other words we cannot understand Mary without Christ, we can’t understand Mary without a sense of what the church is. All these different areas of theology impinge on understanding Mary and Mary is impinging on our understanding of those other areas of theology. It cannot operate separately. It must work together. Mariology, in a sense, assists our understanding of who Christ is or what the Church is.

Fr. Baima: Historically, as we've already said, devotion to Mary and this feminine dimension in the Catholic tradition has been present from very early days. But there were some points in Church history where there were movements against that feminine dimension. I am thinking of the Iconoclast movement, where images of the Blessed Virgin and all the saints were destroyed. But I am also thinking of the opposition to Mariology that emerged in the Protestant Reformation. Could you speak a little bit about that opposition to this dimension of Catholic life?

Fr. Presta: Well as you mentioned, I think that was about 8th century when the Second Council of Nicea declared that the use of icons was perfectly valid form of devotion. It held that icons were art forms that could be used in churches and should be venerated. I think one of the important things to remember is that the depiction of Mary in iconography, especially in the Eastern rite, Mary is usually shown with the Child Jesus. It's rare to see Mary pictured by herself. So, it's very important to keep that feminine dimension alive. It's also important as we look at the Counter Reformation, where Mary had become, perhaps, somewhat elevated. Perhaps people really could not identify as strongly with her and so some of the Protestant reformers said we need to have a more real Mary or perhaps that Mary is not as important to us as perhaps what we had imagined. So there's a break there with the study of Mary and the prominence of Mary in the Counter Reformation with the Protestants.

Fr. Baima: I think we are at a time today where we're also finding some more of this opposition. In Dan Brown's book, *The Da Vinci Code*, there's a lot of reference to feminism and the opposition that it has voiced against the portrayal of Mary in the Catholic Church. I wonder if you could talk a little bit for our listeners about feminism's critique of Mariology. As a Mariologist, how would you respond?

Fr. Presta: I think the main contention of many feminists theologians today would be this; there is certainly a patriarchal feeling as you read different

doctrines and different manuscripts. Really, Christianity itself has kind of a patriarchal feeling to it. I think feminists would like to go back to the first century, at least when we talk about Mary and the New Testament. Who is the real, historical Mary? Who was this woman? What times did she live in? So, they say we need to get in touch with first century Palestine and the Mediterranean woman that she was. When feminist theologians talk in that way, obviously it is important to balance and understand the different things that would touch upon, the writings of the early Church Fathers, the scriptures themselves, any of the doctrines, the emphasis will always be from the feminist point of view. The feminists want to liberate Mary so to speak, from models that have been used on her that somehow help men to understand their own role but diminish women. Obviously, as a Marian theologian, I wouldn't totally agree with that assessment, but that is what feminist theologians would put forward.

Fr. Baima: Certainly going back to the historical roots is a legitimate methodology. Essentially, that is what we do in theology. We try to find the literal sense again going back to the scriptures first and then move forward. In our previous show with Sr. Agnes Cunningham, we explored one of the problems with the feminist approach, which could be called the leveling of sources. There are some sources that are authentic to the Christian faith and others that are outside it. One thing I've seen happening in the feminist critique is that these sources are all treated as equal, even though some are Christian and some are, in effect, non-Christian or have been created by heretical groups. So, one issue when one does historical theology is making certain that one has authentic sources. What would we say would be an approach to a healthy Mariology? If there are critiques about unhealthy Mariology, what's the formula for a healthy Mariological view?

Fr. Presta: Let me refer to Elizabeth Johnson, a Sister of St. Joseph who has written on Mary and while she takes a feminist approach, I think it is also very good balanced approach. One of the things she talks about is that Pope Paul VI wanted to say that good Mariology must have five

characteristics; it must be biblical, liturgical, ecumenical, and anthropological as well as theological. Using all those sophisticated words is another way to say that we have to center Mary in the times that she lived. We have to look at the person she was. We have to look at the scriptures. We have to look at the liturgy itself and even the theology and how it's connected to some of these different areas in order to have good Marian theology. In other words, we have to center our Mariology. We have to figure out exactly what surrounds it and, as you said, some of the things that are written certainly from the early church are the more credible sources. And then some we can't put everything on the same level. So when we talk about good Marian Theology it has to be biblically based in the scriptures. It has to be in the tradition of the Church in terms of liturgy. It certainly has to be sensitive to the different religious points of view within Christianity and sensitive to the different religious groups, as well as being aware of the changing roles of women in their society and in society today. Again, theologically Mary is always placed in relationship to Christ and to the Church. So once, you've used those five characteristics, you get a much more balanced approach about who Mary is. I think it answers a lot of questions even from a feminist point of view. At least it can answer some of the questions and critiques that are sometimes leveled at Mariology.

Fr. Baima: So how would a Catholic today or any Christian for that matter, who wanted to either recover or enter into an authentic Marian piety, proceed to deepen their appreciation for the feminine in Christianity? What would you offer as a recommendation to them?

Fr. Presta: I think quickly of two things, Fr. Baima. The first would be the scriptures themselves. My focus would be on the Gospels, in particular Luke and John. I also think of what Pope John Paul II has done for us with this year of the Rosary that just recently ended by presenting the five new mysteries. We call them the luminous mysteries, mysteries of light. They're more focused on Christ and so now with a total of 20 mysteries which are all scripturally based, we have a better sense of who Christ is in

company with Mary. As you pray the beads and pray the prayers you can also take the scriptures along with it and really journey with Christ throughout his birth and his ministry, death and resurrection. We pray in company with Mary. We are disciples in company with Mary. I really think that praying of the rosary and keeping it biblically based is a wonderful way to renew your own Marian piety and I can't think of a better way to renew it than looking at the scriptures themselves.

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Fr. Presta: One of the things that Pope Paul VI talks about in his encyclical, *Marianis Cultus*, is that good Mariology must have five characteristics; it must be biblical, liturgical, ecumenical, and anthropological as well as theological. Using all those sophisticated words is another way to say that we have to center Mary in the times that she lived. We have to look at the person she was. We have to look at the scriptures. We have to look at the liturgy itself and even the theology and how it's connected to some of these different areas in order to have good Marian theology. In other words, we have to center our Mariology. We have to figure out exactly what surrounds it and, as you said, some of the things that are written certainly from the early church are the more credible sources. And then some we can't put everything on the same level. So when we talk about good Marian Theology it has to be biblically based in the scriptures. It has to be in the tradition of the Church in terms of liturgy. It certainly has to be sensitive to the different religious points of view within Christianity and sensitive to the different religious groups, as well as being aware of the changing roles of women in their society and in society today. Again, theologically Mary is always placed in relationship to Christ and to the Church. So once, you've used those five characteristics, you get a much more balanced approach about who Mary is. I think it answers a lot of

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Fr. Baima: Well, that's about all the time we have today. My thanks to Fr. James Presta, the Rector / President of St. Joseph College Seminary for sharing his insights with us today on *Speaking of Theology*.

Was Abraham Lincoln Wrong?

By

Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I.

Each time I go from my house to my car I look at Lincoln Park. It's particularly beautiful these Spring days, with white and pink blossoms on many trees and various shades of green on the partially opened leaves.

Lincoln Park was created after the Civil War and the debacle of the Great Chicago Fire to honor an Illinois hero who was a martyred president. When I was in grade school, long before the advent of "Presidents' Day," we had a free day every February 12, because it was Lincoln's birthday. It made sense to have a day to honor Lincoln. Celebrating Presidents' Day, however, makes as much sense as would the creation of a "Popes' Day." Some Popes you want to thank God for (especially the many who are saints) and some you want to forget; so it is with Presidents. Lincoln, however, complex as he was, is worth remembering.

Worth remembering as well is a saying of Lincoln's that I recall goes something like this: You can fool some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time. Has Abraham Lincoln finally been proved wrong by the seemingly unlimited popularity of the *Da Vinci Code*?

Will people now really believe that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and had a child whose blood flows in the veins of the first French royal house (where else)? Will people now believe that the Catholic Church is an organized conspiracy designed to hide this "fact" for two thousand years (why not)? Will people finally understand that the martyrs of the Church's first three hundred years didn't themselves believe that Jesus had risen from the dead and was truly the eternal Son of God but, rather, endured torture and death just to hide his secret marriage (didn't Henry Ford say that history is bunk)? Will people swallow with delight

the story of a two thousand year old conspiracy based on papers forged in France in the 1960's (wasn't that a time of universal enlightenment)? Will the Louvre Museum become a place of universal pilgrimage to honor the bones of the Eternal Feminine buried there (could Paris handle the crowds)? Can anybody hear Lincoln turning in his grave (actually, in his crypt in Springfield)?

Maybe the *Da Vinci Code's* tale, now told in a "major movie," will prove as ephemeral a social phenomenon as the hula hoop or pet rocks. It's of a different magnitude of importance, however, because it's about Jesus. Who Jesus is becomes a question for each generation, because he claimed to be Son of God and savior of the human race. People in Jesus' time had difficulty believing this. Jesus' entire public life could be summarized in the various attempts to figure out his identity. His enemies got it wrong, but so did many of his friends. The Church got it right after Jesus' resurrection and has been telling the world who He is for two thousand years. But false identities of Jesus, first invented two thousand years ago, have been invented constantly ever since. Sometimes the ideas are original; often they are just re-treads of old heresies come back to have another day in the sun. The *Da Vinci Code* espouses a Gnostic theory about Jesus. We are saved, according to this third century theory, not by our relationship to Jesus but by the special secret knowledge he knew and handed on to those he wanted to bring into his circle. What's important are Jesus' sayings, especially the "lost" or esoteric sayings, not his passion, death and resurrection. Conspiracy theories fit easily into our social mind set; a risen Lord does not. So we stay with what responds to our curiosity rather than convert to truths that challenge our life. It's an old story, unfortunately.

Evangelizing means telling the world the truth about Jesus Christ. So far, in the history of the human race, this mission of the Church could continue because not all of the people had yet been fooled about Christ all of the time. Is that about to change? Will the whole world, taken in by a popular novel, now be wrong about who Christ is? No, but it might be close. P.T. Barnum, another well-known American, said there's a sucker

born every minute. These days, Barnum is resting comfortably in his grave.

May is the month of Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus and the mother of the Church. In her love for us, Mary constantly points out our needs to her divine Son. Perhaps the best response to the barrage of foolishness about Jesus and the Church that will continue this month is to turn to Mary in prayer and ask her to keep pointing us, in turn, to her Son. The Blessed Virgin Mary, when all is said and done and when all is written and filmed, knows more about Jesus than anyone else. In judging any theory or tale about Jesus, perhaps the question to ask is: What would Mary think? You won't find her answer reflected in *the Da Vinci Code*. God bless you.

Thomas A. Baima
Robert J. Barron
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Michael Fuller
Francis Cardinal George,OMI
Lawrence Hennessey
Graziano Marcheschi
James Presta