

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 DaVinci 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 DaVinci 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 DaVinci Code* denies the divinity of Christ. It distorts the relationship between Christ and his Apostles and constructs a story that Leonardo DaVinci, 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 DaVinci 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 unsettled by some of the allegations or some of the implications found in the book. Why do you think that is? Why does *the DaVinci Code* not rouse a, "He can't do that, he can't say that!" reaction from the reader?

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 Christian 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.