

The What's Wrong with the DaVinci 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 DaVinci 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 in sacred theology from the *Institut Catholique de Paris*. Fr. Barron, welcome to *Speaking of Theology*.

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

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

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).

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 DaVinci 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 DaVinci 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 DaVinci*

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 DaVinci 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 DaVinci 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 DaVinci 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 DaVinci 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 Chartres (Our Lady of Chartres), 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. Chartres 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

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

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.

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 DaVinci 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 DaVinci 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

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.

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 DaVinci 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

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.

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.

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 DaVinci 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*.

