

Novel inspires religious discussion

Jennifer Burke/Catholic Courier

The Da Vinci Code doesn't begin with gripping action, an introduction to the characters or even a prologue. Yes, all those things do come within the first 10 pages, but the very first page contains three simple paragraphs, under the bold, one-word headline "FACT," assuring readers that all descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals portrayed in the novel are accurate.

The statement does not mean, however, that the book is either free from errors or a work of nonfiction, according to Deacon Tom Driscoll, director of community education at Pittsford's St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry.

It's important to keep in mind that *The Da Vinci Code* is a novel, Driscoll said during an April 28 discussion of the book, which was part of a weekly Theology on Tap session in Rochester. Although there are elements of truth in the novel, there are also many inaccuracies as well.

The Da Vinci Code tells the story of Harvard scholar and lecturer Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu, a cryptologist with the French police. Following the murder of the curator

of Paris' famous Louvre, Langdon and Neveu find themselves in a race to stay one step ahead of the French police and on a hunt to find the Holy Grail.

The book asserts that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married and had a child named Sarah, and that Mary Magdalene is the Holy Grail. According to the novel, the Catholic Church has tried to hide this by tarnishing Mary Magdalene's reputation and only including in the New Testament Gospels that focus on Christ's divinity, not his humanity.

"It's a page turner, and ... I thoroughly enjoyed it as a novel," Driscoll said. However, he added, "I knew that there were some errors in there."

One of the book's glaring errors, he said, is the notion that the Roman Emperor Constantine manufactured the divinity of Jesus at the Council of Nicaea. According to the novel, Jesus was considered by his followers to be a mortal prophet until the council, when those present voted to establish Jesus as the Son of God in order to unify the Roman Empire.

This is simply not true, Driscoll said. While Constantine was emperor, Christianity was legalized and structurally solidified — possibly to

help hold the empire together. The divinity of Christ, however, was not "invented" during the council.

Catholic readers running across notions such as this for the first time may become confused, troubled or angry, Driscoll said. It may also be the first time they learn some things that are true, such as the fact that there are more Gospels than those included in the Bible's New Testament. This book may challenge long-held beliefs or ideas, but in doing so gets people to think about those beliefs and ideas and ask profound questions, presenting a teachable moment, Driscoll said.

Besides the Theology on Tap discussion, Driscoll has also led a handful of other talks and discussions about the novel throughout the diocese, and one more is scheduled to take place in June.

"People are very interested in our history ... and it's provoked a lot of good discussion. In that sense it's similar to 'The Passion of the Christ.' I think there's a great hunger out there," Driscoll said.

That hunger is a good thing, and it's important to take advantage of the opportunity to promote learning and greater understanding, he added.

"I think that people are so hungry that they're willing to grasp at anything. A number of people want to see more to it than it is, so part of it is helping (them) to step back and see what we're looking at here," he said.

Jean Derby, a member of St. Thomas More Parish in Brighton, attended the Theology on Tap discussion about the novel. She originally read the novel with a book club, and after finishing the book, many of the non-Catholic members wanted to know if various elements of the book were true.

"I didn't have all the info to kind of dispel things. I was kind of in the hot seat," Derby said.

After attending the discussion, Derby felt she was in a better position to discuss the book with others, Catholics and non-Catholic alike.

"I just thought it was interesting the things it brought out," she said.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Deacon Tom Driscoll will lead a discussion of *The Da Vinci Code* at 7 p.m. June 16 at Pittsford's St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry. The cost is \$10. To register, go to www.st-bernards.edu and click on Da Vinci, or call 585/271-3657.



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