

DEBUNKING THE DA VINCI CODE

In mid-October, ABC invited the Catholic League to view a rough cut of an upcoming ABC News special, "Jesus, Mary, and Da Vinci," which dealt with some of the theories underlying Dan Brown's novel The Da Vinci Code. Given the offensive nature of some of the novel's claims, it would be difficult to believe that the invitation was sent without an eye to ABC's past trespasses against Catholics. League policy analyst Joseph De Feo attended the screening and offered his comments.

The *Da Vinci Code* may be fictional, but Dan Brown has declared himself "a believer." ABC News produced an hour-long special attempting to separate fact from fiction in Brown's book.

Briefly, Brown's premise is that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a child. At some point after the Crucifixion, she fled to France, where her child sired a line of kings. Meanwhile, the Church conspired to sully the Magdalene's name and remove all evidence of her sexual relationship with Jesus from the Bible. Only a secret society knew the truth, which was hidden through the ages for fear of persecution by the Church.

Even if the theories examined in this special hardly warrant serious treatment, a program discussing them should still hold to certain journalistic standards. The ABC special had its lapses. Its very existence dignified conspiracy theories with attention beyond their merits, treating them as real arguments to be examined instead of canards best dismissed.

Opening questions for viewers sounded like lines from a cheap exposé: "What if we told you that some people think Mary Magdalene was not a repentant prostitute but instead Jesus' wife?" And a majority of airtime was given to cranks and ideologues who bought the crackpot theories wholesale. Adding to the already-lopsided representation was commentary by only one priest: Notre Dame theologian Father Richard

McBrien. He stated that Mary Magdalene had all the credentials to be an apostle (meshing nicely with his desire for the ordination of women). He also remarked that the Church's attitudes toward sex have been "very unhealthy."

Another flaw was the program's inconsistent use of evidence. The special notes that we now know there is no biblical evidence conclusively showing Mary Magdalene to have been a prostitute, and so the matter is settled. It also notes that there is no biblical evidence of Jesus' marriage to the Magdalene, but the same historical source is ruled out on this question. If the Bible was rewritten to hide this relationship (as Brown holds), why trust it on the matter of the Magdalene's prostitution—or any other matter?

The program suggested that there is something sinister about "orthodoxy," and its often-ominous tone was better suited to a program on the Trilateral Commission and the New World Order than to a program on a major world religion. These are just a few faults of the program itself.

After the screening, the two dozen or so viewers were invited to lunch and a friendly discussion of the show. In attendance were the show's producers, a few ABC executives (including David Westin, the head of ABC News), members of the media, representatives from a few Christian churches, and others. I was the sole representative of a Catholic organization.

Elizabeth Vargas, the program's anchor, opened the discussion. She and a few ABC producers were quick to mention their Catholic upbringings. When I pointed out that Father Richard McBrien was a curious choice to represent the Church, Ms. Vargas pointed out that Fr. McBrien made for an interesting guest because he will surprise viewers by deviating from the stereotype of a priest parroting the accepted teachings of the Church. I noted that there are worse stereotypes to fight.

Several guests claimed to have learned a good deal from *The Da*

Vinci Code. One ABC correspondent embarrassingly said that she did not know that the divinity of Jesus was only established in the fourth century. Other howlers clearly demonstrated *The Da Vinci Code*'s ill effect on popular historical knowledge—one of the few undeniable facts established during the discussion.

The most interesting question is why such a pretentious and historically inaccurate novel is getting so much attention. Its plot is stretched thin over a frame of hackneyed ideas—a muddle of Gnosticism, Rosicrucianism, and Freemasonry, reinforced by feminism and New Age mush. The answer may be that the atmosphere is just right for it: with the scandal still hovering over the Church, people are open to conspiracy theories about it. If the theory denigrates the institutional Church in favor of ill-defined spirituality, belittles celibacy, and raises the possibility of ordained women, it's a guaranteed bestseller.

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"The Volatile Notion of a Married Jesus"

"Joseph De Feo, policy analyst for the Catholic League, then asked the show's producers why they hadn't solicited opinions from Roman Catholics other than the Rev. Richard McBrien ... who, Mr. De Feo said, is known chiefly for his far-out views and his 'shtick' about Mary Magdalene's primacy among Jesus's apostles." Rudy Bednar, an executive producer at ABC, responded that the Catholic view had been expressed in the documentary by various evangelicals the producers had consulted. Mr. De Feo, perhaps bridling at the idea that arch-Protestants should represent the opinions of Catholics, shot Mr. Bednar a look of incredulity."

