

“Spinning the Code: Opus Dei,’ and Religious Public Relations”

By Claire Hoertz Badaracco

As Hollywood anticipated a box office blockbuster when Ron Howard’s film version of the DaVinci Code opened, Opus Dei and the Catholic Bishops used public relations tactics to dispel anti-Christian prejudice and reposition the identity of the little known organization, Opus Dei, the lay Catholic organization lambasted in the film. At a time when cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed caused riots, and when religious fundamentalism in the Middle East fuels war among Muslims, Jews and Christians, the idea that any media production can be treated as “mere entertainment” is not borne out by the facts. The realities of global fundamentalism and religious climates embedded in entertainment products has caused a sea change in the practice of religious public relations. With the release of the DaVinci Code, public relations practices by religious organizations draw on the

precedent of affinity marketing created by Mel Gibson’s *Passion*, using the church infrastructure as a communication network.

Rather than boycott the film, the Personal Prelature of Opus Dei and the hierarchy of the

**...the media these days
have an unquenchable thirst
for religion as a
backdrop to stories.**

American Catholic Church called for making this a teachable moment. Fighting fire with fire, so to speak, they used websites designed shrewdly along the lines of what Dan Brown did, to evangelize and reach Catholics with information about the faith, and to provide key copy points that they could use to counter the anti-Christian distortions in the film. While opposition among Catholics to the film has been “building,” according to Opus Dei’s website, the proactive media counter-offensive waged by their Church is organized, media-savvy and globally accessible to all, both pro and anti Christian factions throughout the globe.

In the three months prior to the release of the Code film, ABC’s Diane Sawyer, MSNBC’s Chris Mathews on *Hardball*, three reporters from CNN, and a cover story on *Time* magazine put the 3,000 member Opus Dei organization located on Lexington Avenue into the limelight. “It’s like trying to feed an army,” according to Brian Finnerty, in charge of media relations for Opus Dei, who spoke in a teleconference with the students of



Claire Hoertz Badaracco

Marquette University studying media and religion. Contrary to the fiction in the film, Opus Dei's identity has been far from "secret;" it is an organization with 87,000 members worldwide — none of them monks. But the media these days have an unquenchable thirst for religion as a backdrop for stories.

Nothing sells like a good religious conspiracy, as spin-offs replicate for the new genre based on Dan Brown's success. With more and more media products making claims for truth about religion and authenticity, the religious public relations practitioner needs to unpack the blurred distinctions between history or hoax, that make these stories spin. For example, Michael Baigent lost his copyright violation lawsuit in the UK against Brown, which had claimed that Brown's Code plagiarized his idea of a married Jesus from his book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*. The lawsuit, which was unsuccessful, hit the headlines just as Baigent's *Jesus Papers* hit the bookstores in the US. Using lawsuits as a publicity tactic is as old as Ivy Ledbetter Lee, and Baigent achieved the pre-publication notoriety for his otherwise unknown name, though the British Judge rejected the suit. Curiously, the blasphemy in his work was met with silence from the worldwide Christian communicators. More surprisingly was the seriousness with which presumably sensible news media treated Baigent's ideas about the Vatican's suppression of "lost documents." The idea of the conspiracy and lost documents replayed time and again, is not quite viral marketing, but the idea clearly because contagious, picked up and disseminated by news media. Even the *National Geographic* got the fever, with the *Gospel of Judas* featured in its May 2006 issue, and a TV special turned into a DVD. This seriousness is all about a document of questionable provenance rejected by Yale's Beinecke division of rare books and manuscripts, but which nonetheless reaped \$2.5 million for its archeological "finder." When the *New York Times* reported on the *Gospel of Judas* on page one, center, above the fold, it was during the Easter-Passover holiday — the place where Americans usually read about the War in Iraq, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates. The problem of blurred fact and fiction, and news and historical fact, are the crux of the strategic thinking for today's public relations practitioner working with religiously embedded messages. Given the pervasive quality of these messages in all types of products, it would appear that the role of the religious public relations practitioner is no longer relegated to preaching to the choir. Through multi-media and sound strategic initiatives, public relations for religions can 'move the needle,' as the work of Opus Dei and the Catholic bishops demonstrates.

One month before the film's release, Opus Dei released a half hour video of its own, profiling members of the organization; and made the DVD easily obtainable, free for the asking on its website (www.opusdei.org). One telegenic priest member, based in Rome, a graduate of the "real Harvard," as he put in on his website, maintains a blog site that is clever, witty, light, and user-friendly (www.davincicode-opusdei.com). The Catholic Exchange of Opus Dei published a book length response to Frequently Asked Questions, *The Da Vinci Deception* to address the errors in the DaVinci Code. And a coalition of Catholic groups including the high profile Catholic League, led by spokesman William Donahue, made a series of media appearances.

Perhaps taking a pattern from the rollout of Mel Gibson's film that used the evangelical parish structure, Catholics used the same affinity marketing tactics. Opus Dei, through the Catholic Exchange, prepared a media kit, including a "homily helps" diocesan plan for Adult Faith Formation Coordinators, Directors of Religious Education, key copy points about the errors in the Code for priests and deacons, and month's worth of lessons for discussion groups in parishes along with the posters and advertising materials to publicize the sessions, and materials for Youth Ministers, all available without charge on a website www.davinciantidote.com. Opus Dei's communication with Dan Brown's publisher Doubleday, led to an agreement that Doubleday would publish *The Way*, written by

**...it would appear that the
role of the religious
public relations practitioner
is no longer relegated to
preaching to the choir.**

the organization's founder Josemaria Escriva, "an explanation and spiritual guide" for those whose interest was piqued by the DaVinci Code book and film that cast an Opus Dei "albino monk" as the murderous villain.

From Japan, the leadership of the Opus Dei organization addressed (April 6, 2006) Sony Corporation and its shareholders, appealing to its "great tradition and sense of social responsibility," to attach a preface to the film, a disclaimer that the work is fiction, because the novel says, according to the letter that "the Christian Faith is founded on a lie, and the Catholic Church has over the cen-

turies employed criminal and violent means to keep people in ignorance." Wisely acknowledging that in the media today the "name of God" is "used to justify hatred and violence," Seizo Inahata, Information Officer for Opus Dei, Japan, appealed to Sony to try to keep the peace.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Communication Campaign produced a one hour documentary, which NBC ran in prime time, designed to coincide with the release of the film. Titled Jesus Decoded, the website is also instructive, and provides information about how to obtain the DVD of the documentary, with a sample trailer for viewing on the website (www.jesusdecoded.com). The film Jesus Decoded aims to "bring authentic Catholic teaching about Jesus Christ back into focus," according to the website.

The concept of the proper focus is carried out in the advertisement for the film, presenting a strong visual contrast to the by now well known eyes of

**...well known eyes of
The Mona Lisa...are
cropped in publicity blurbs
in such a way that they
resemble the eyes of
a woman in a burkha...**

The Mona Lisa used to advertise Howard's film of Brown's novel, which are cropped in publicity blurbs in such a way that they resemble the eyes of a woman in a burkha — everything else is hidden but the eyes. In the USCCB film, the full face of Christ, eyes wide and open as a Byzantine Icon, look straight into the reader's, promising to restore the word "Mystery" to its use in the religious sense, before entertainment products containing religious messages within the plot led public opinion to blur the idea of Christianity with implicit conspiracy. PRG

Claire Hoertz Badaracco, PhD. is Professor of Communication at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She is the author of several books, is widely published in academic journals, and is the editor of Quoting God: How Media Shape Ideas about Religion (2005).

Want to keep getting this magazine?

Are you reading a colleague's copy of *Public Relations Quarterly*? Order your own one-year subscription today for only \$65 US/Canada add \$5.00.

Name _____

Title _____

Company _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip/Postal Code _____

Country _____

Phone () _____

Fax () _____

Email: _____

Check payable to
Public Relations Quarterly

Charge my

Visa Mastercard Amex

Card # _____

Expires _____

Public Relations Quarterly
P.O. Box 311
Rhinebeck, NY 12572

Fax to: 845-876-2561

Or call: 800-572-3451