

May 19

Sal sent me the following book review:

“I have spent the past two weeks immersed in "Vows: The Story of a Priest, a Nun, and Their Son", by Peter Manseau, Free Press, NY, 2005. I think that this is a pivotal book in the history of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. It is written as a memoir by the author about the religious vocations of his mother, his father, and himself, but covers in one breathtaking sweep the high point and decline of one of our greatest immigrant dioceses in the twentieth century.

To me it was uncannily the 'story of my life'. Mary Dougherty, the nun and mother, grew up about a mile from the house where I was born. The priest and father spent the last thirty years of his life in Tewksbury , Mass., where my sister and her family lived for twenty years, and where my niece and nephew attended the same church as the Manseau family. But most of all, the chronology was simultaneous with my own, marching through World War II, The Second Vatican Council, the heady promise of reform and renewal in the Church, followed by the exodus of over 200,000 priests and religious from the failed reform. It finally ends with a sickening crash as the pedophile crisis comes to a head at the beginning of the millennium in Boston.

The author, under the tutelage of his parents, reveals the depths of faith, hope, and love that permeate the Catholics who built the Church of Massachusetts, along with the shameful neglect and abuse of power by the hierarchy.

There is much to weep for here, much to mourn about lost innocence. But the prognosis for the Church, as the doctors would say, is guarded. Will the Catholic Church survive? It is already clear that it has not: not in the way we knew it. As Peter asks, over and over again, throughout the book, how can his parents still believe in and still love a Church that has treated them so shabbily and heartlessly?

Do yourself a favor and ask for the book at your local library.”

Perfect timing for 'The Da Vinci Code'

Post-crisis Catholics, questioning celibacy and marginalization of women by the church, will flock to theaters

(Pat McDonough is a psychologist and Catholic educator, public speaker and syndicated columnist for the Catholic press.)

May 10, 2006

Forty million hardcover copies have been sold, the paperback is a best-seller, and the movie will open to sellout crowds next week. What's driving "The Da Vinci Code" craze? Is it something in the story or something in us?

Sure, it's got a winning combination of suspense and secrets, spiced with art history and a little romance. But is there something more fundamental fueling the success of Dan Brown's fiction?

The Catholic Church, quick to condemn its theology, can't ignore its sociology. Christians want to know Jesus, how he lived and whom he loved. It's a task easily accomplished through the Gospels, which are proclaimed and preached at Mass every day. But my guess is Catholics will pack theaters rather than parishes to gain a glimpse of the holy next week, in spite of the Vatican's urging the faithful to boycott "The Da Vinci Code."

Disillusioned by the priest sex-abuse scandal, worn out by the clergy crisis and conflicts between culture and church teaching, Catholics - young Catholics, in particular - might look toward Hollywood for hope and healing next week. It will be a futile attempt to replace faith, but nonetheless a sign that broken hearts still want to believe.

The church teaches that the clergy are ontologically changed at ordination, set apart not simply to act in Jesus' name but to be Jesus "in persona Christi." When consecrating the Eucharist, the priest doesn't say, "This is the body of Christ." He says, "This is my body." In the confessional, he says, "I absolve you of your sins," not "Jesus absolves you of your sins."

No doubt the role of priests and the reality of the past few years have taken a toll on the church's victims, their families and the entire Catholic community. Dan Brown vilifies the Vatican, tapping into the betrayal felt by children who suffered at the hands of a priest, whose suffering was exacerbated by clerics who covered for their collared colleagues.

Would Brown's book have been a blockbuster prior to the sex-abuse scandal? In 1982, "Holy Blood, Holy Grail," by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln, claimed that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a child. It came and went unnoticed until this year's failed plagiarism suit. Maybe Brown mixed mystery and myth so cleverly that he was bound for the best-seller list, or maybe the timing was just right for a story about a savior who embodied God's dictate, "It is not good for man to be alone."

People are responding en masse to the book and possibly to the idea that Jesus had a partner, a soulmate, a spouse. Post-crisis Catholics, clergy included, are questioning the necessity of celibacy as a charism for the Catholic priesthood today.

For centuries, Catholic priests, like the disciples, were married. The motivation to mandate celibacy in the Middle Ages had more to do with property and power than prayerful leadership. Basic biology tells us that if a group fails to reproduce for centuries, it will eventually become extinct. Are readers buying Brown's book and buying into the possibility that a married Jesus could mean a married clergy and more priests to serve the increasing number of Catholics?

The Gospels offer no indication that Jesus was married to Mary of Magdala, but the evangelists do place her at the cross, standing courageously as the male disciples fled in fear. There's no question that the Risen Lord appears first, not to one of the 12 apostles, but to Mary Magdalene. Why is she trusted to proclaim the Good News of the Resurrection at a time when women's roles were so restricted?

While Scripture scholars speculate and the church admits that its portrayal of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute was a mistake, Catholics are questioning why women in the early church were

marginalized, why female saints were outnumbered by male saints 7-1, and why most women were canonized as virgins. Before John Paul II died, he moved to canonize a married couple. As it turns out, the couple, Luigi and Maria Beltrame Quattrocchi, ceased having sex after their four children were born, and all four of those children entered religious life and vowed celibacy, suggesting a hint of unholiness in marital relations, at least in the eyes of Rome.

As the clergy crisis continues to unfold and cost more than \$1 billion in damages, you can bet believers will find the money to buy a copy of Brown's book or a ticket to the movie. People are hurt, but they're still hungry. And if people are hungry enough, they'll eat anything. Those who are starving spiritually will invest in a story that feeds them. Although Brown's book may be junk food, it reminds readers that Jesus loved women, trusted them and needed them to bring God's plan to fruition.

When innocent children are dehumanized and intelligent women marginalized, the image of God, in which we are all made, is compromised. Dan Brown capitalized on that.

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May 15

John, from Florida, sent me the following link, with the attached comment:

“That one set me thinking for a couple of days. I think the success of the Da Vinci Code has more to do with pop culture and profit than anything. But people's willingness to embrace ideas that challenge the doctrine of organized religion probably stems from a quiet but uneasy feeling that the people we allow to lead us are more interested in temporal rewards than the ones they promise us eternally in Jesus' name. This article is long but worth it.”

www.tompaine.com/articles/2006/03/22/a_time_for_heresy.php

May 6

I am a big fan of divided government for the same reason that I am a big fan of reasoned debate in the Church. If people are only speaking with those who agree with them, their worst decisions go unchallenged. We need our opponents to keep us honest; we need our opponents to hone our debating skills; we need our opponents to help us discover the truth.

Some who have written to me disagree (occasionally vehemently) with what I have written. I am grateful to them for taking the time to write. Some of you have helped me to clarify why I was no longer able to publicly represent the Church. Some few even questioned the need for ongoing conversation when the Church already possesses the Truth.

I, too, believe that we possess the Truth. We call the Truth “Christ.” But I also side firmly with St. Paul who contends that our perception of the truth is like looking into a First Century mirror – it can often seem cloudy and distorted. We need others to help us clarify the truth. These others can be those who share our vision. Often they are not.

The Bush budget, which puts private money over the public interest, shows what happens when there is no opposition. They are able to dismantle environmental and safety protections, reward

their rich friends with tax breaks, de-regulate Big Business, and shatter the social safety net with impunity.

The Bush War, which prizes conquest over life, shows what can happen when the legislature and the press fail to demand the truth. The Executive branch can lie about weapons of mass destruction, divert attention from critical areas of conflict, and empty the Treasury into their pockets without opposition, because they control all sides of the debate.

Yes, I am a big fan of divided government. November can not come soon enough.

April 29

We only have to look around at the drama of creation to see the power of the resurrection myth. Mind you, I am not speaking of myth as something that is not true, but as something that is more than true.

Peter, a prayer-partner, pointed out that it is only because galaxies died that our earth was born. Like John Shea, he observed that we are made of stardust.

Isn't it sadly wonderful that something as magnificent as a star must die before the stem cells of our universe can differentiate into a human creature? Isn't it sadly wonderful that a human creature must die before our matter can replenish the earth and our pure energy can be reabsorbed into the Holy One?

This is the season when the Jesus Myth compels us to examine the many ways that the death-resurrection cycle plays itself out all around us.

We thank God for the cycle of nature, where here, in the northeast, we can see the earth, which seemed so lifeless, bursting with new life. We praise God for connections which unravel, sometimes painfully, and free us for new relationships. We glorify God who allows us to see in nieces, nephews and grandchildren, faint glimpses of parents and grandparents who are no longer with us.

In some marvelous, terrifying, wonderful, painful way, we die so that we might live more fully. Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!
