

A Rev! Interview With Amy Welborn

Looking for answers on the seeming lack of Catholic response to Dan Brown's book, Rev! interviewed Amy Welborn, author of *De-Coding Da Vinci*. Welborn earned her master of arts in church history from Vanderbilt University. She's a columnist and book reviewer for Our Sunday Visitor, and the creator of Open Book, a popular Catholic blog—which can be found at her Web site AmyWelborn.typepad.com.

Rev!: There have been a spate of evangelical Protestant books and DVDs produced to respond to the Dan Brown's book. In comparison, there hasn't been nearly as much Catholic reaction to the book. Why?

Welborn: I think most of it has to do with the differences between the Evangelical and Catholic publishing worlds. Not many Catholic publishers are equipped to do quick books, nor is that the Catholic publishing culture—they are, for the most part, not about responding to popular trends.

Here on the ground, however, I can tell you that even though there were but three “Catholic” response to *The Da Vinci Code*, there was a great deal of activity in parishes—I know many people who have been doing a great deal of speaking on *The Da Vinci Code* over the past two years. They may not have written any books, but they’ve been out there, trying to set people straight.

Rev!: Brown alleges, among many things, that the early church (the emerging Catholic Church) systematically persecuted women and feminine expressions of God, etc. What’s your response to that charge, both as a church historian and as a devout Catholic laywoman?

Welborn: Dan Brown is able to make these charges because he completely ignored the reality and totality of Christian history. I would suggest that some non-Catholic Christians have, in the past, actually *faulted* Catholicism for a feminine-centered spirituality—that is the widespread and ancient devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Brown's contention that Mary Magdalene was demonized is ridiculous.

Mary Magdalene is a saint—after the Blessed Virgin, the most popular saint of the Middle Ages. Her images were everywhere, and she was held up as a model of faithful discipleship and repentance.

Roman Catholic history is filled with female saints who have been honored and seen as models by men and woman alike. It's filled with strong women in leadership. It's characterized by a strong devotion to Mary the Mother of Jesus. That's not "suppression" of feminine-oriented spirituality in my book.

Rev!: Everyone acknowledges that the novel is a cultural phenomenon. Putting the factual issues aside for a minute, why do you believe the novel has captured popular attention?

Welborn: It started with canny marketing by Doubleday. Then it snowballed. I think there are three factors. Many readers are honestly intrigued by the "code" aspect of the novel. Secondly, many women like the speculation about Mary Magdalene. Third, it gives some readers an

opportunity to indulge their negative feelings about Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular.

Rev!: You've obviously chosen to vigorously oppose the ideas in the novel. What's your reaction to people who say something to the effect of, "Lighten up already; it's just a novel"?

Welborn: I do wish that everyone understood that it's only a novel. However, if you look at reader reviews on Amazon, Internet discussion boards on the novel, and even my email, you can see that it's not so.

The historical assertions in *The Da Vinci Code* are presented authoritatively, with strong assertions that "all historians" know that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married, for example. There's a bibliography in the novel and a more extensive one on Dan Brown's Web site. There's that front page of the novel titled "Fact." There are Brown's statements themselves, which have, over the years, indicated that he's glad to present this alternative view of history to readers.

I started writing about this, not because I cared about the novel itself, but because I was responding to a need that was expressed to me in countless emails. People's faith was being disturbed. Other people's faith—that Christianity was the root of all evil—was being confirmed. People *do* take the “history” and “art” in the novel very seriously. I've spoken to more than a few art historians who are very distressed by how many people come to them raving about the novel and how informative it is about art, when in fact, it's completely off about art.

Rev!: If you were a local church pastor, how would you use the novel (and forthcoming film by Ron Howard) as a tool for education, outreach, or other use in the local parish?

Welborn: I'd use it as an occasion to teach the truth. I would not encourage people to see the movie at all. You don't need to see the movie to discuss the historical assertions within. They're presented very straightforwardly, in speeches and monologues. They can be listed on a whiteboard and then discussed.

Pastors might not realize how much confusion there is out there about early Christian history—the popularity of this book exposes it. For example, serious Christians will say to you, “What’s the harm if Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married?” In that question they’re exposing two things. They’re exposing how little they actually know about the gospels, and, even more deeply, their lack of faith in the authority of the gospels. Secondly, they’re exposing a blank spot in their theological understanding of Jesus’ relationship to the Church. We are all wedded to Christ; the Church is his spouse. The covenant/marriage imagery is a vital, rich aspect of the way the Old and New Testaments talk about God’s relationship to his people. To say that there’s “no harm” in the idea of a marriage displays a lack of understanding of this truth.

One could have any number of classes or seminars spinning off *The Da Vinci Code* in which really solid teaching could happen:

“The Real Wedding of Jesus”

“Who was Mary Magdalene?”

“Did Constantine invent Christianity?”

And so on. You would pack the church.

Rev!: On his Web site, Dan Brown says he's a Christian. Do you know what he means by that? For example, is he Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, etc.? Have you ever had a chance to dialogue with him about any of the issues in the book?

Welborn: I have no idea if Dan Brown is really a Christian or not. Dan Brown hasn't given interviews in at least two years. He's very secluded up there in New Hampshire, evidently suffering from severe writer's block on his next book, which has been delayed many times and even now has no publication date scheduled.

Rev!: What's your reaction to people who say that the unintended consequence of resources (such as yours) that attempt to debunk the novel are doing nothing more than selling more of Brown's books and tickets to Ron Howard's movie?

Welborn: I don't—because I tell people over and over: You don't have to read the novel; you don't have to see the movie. I'll tell you what happens, and we can go from there.

Some Christian responders are cooperating with Sony, however, and even encouraging Christians to see the film so they can dialogue about it. They're playing right into Sony's hands on this one and enabling the purveyors of lies about Christ to profit from those lies.

Rev!: Are churches and pastors in part to blame for the success of Dan Brown, due to the perceived huge and growing biblical illiteracy among the laity? (And even more illiteracy about church history?)

Welborn: Churches, pastors, educators, religious schools—yes, they (we) are all to blame. The reasons are different in Protestant and Catholic churches, but the fact is, for whatever reason, hardly any Christians are taught, for example, about the establishment of the canon of Scripture. So when Dan Brown's characters come on and talk about the "80" gospels that were floating around, all with interesting and perhaps valid takes on Jesus' story, but Constantine picked four in order to validate his own power—even if it doesn't sound right, they've never heard any

differently, and they have nothing to go back to in their past education to dispute Brown's contentions.

Rev!: Last question—if you had the attention of every pastor (Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox), what's the most important thing he or she needs to know about the *The Da Vinci Code*?

Welborn: You need to know that *The Da Vinci Code* has exposed a massive ignorance, not only about matters like the canon of Scripture and the role of Constantine in early Christian history, but on the nature of Scripture itself. Those who are shaken by the *The Da Vinci Code* have never been taught about the evidentiary value and authority of the New Testament writings. They don't know that indeed, the witness offered by those books is very reliable. They need to know that this novel exposes, on a broader level, how poor a job we all have done in preaching Jesus. Just go to message boards where this work is hotly discussed. The ignorance about who Jesus is, what he did, and what he said is shocking. Too much of Christian energy in this culture goes toward preaching to the converted—and this shows that we don't even do that well.

