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Opus Dei prelate to visit U.S. and Canada

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 8, 2006 All Things Catholic

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Bishop Javier Echevarr'a Rodr'guez, the prelate of Opus Dei, will be in the United States and Canada Sept. 12-28, visiting New York, Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver, San Francisco and Houston.

While the trip is billed as a routine pastoral visit, Echevarr'a's North American swing also amounts to a sort of victory following the *The Da Vinci Code* juggernaut, which went out with a whimper rather than a bang in May after the Ron Howard film was widely panned. (Writing in *The New Yorker*, Anthony Lane suggested that Opus Dei no longer needed corporal mortification -- just buy tickets and settle in for "2 and ½ hours of pain.")

Rather improbably, given the sinister way Opus Dei was depicted, all the hoopla surrounding the book and movie seems to have had broadly positive effects for the group. As part of this picture, many Opus Dei officials expect to see a "Da Vinci Code bump" in membership.

One example is Bob Zulandi, 61, who works for an energy development company in Oakton, Virginia, putting together deals for the production of natural gas. A cradle Catholic, Zulandi told me in early September that he picked up *The Da Vinci Code* in 2004, never having heard of Opus Dei before.

He recalled thinking, "This is nuts ? there can't really be a group like this."

"I got curious," Zulandi said. "I wanted to know what this group does, what it's all about, so I went to the Opus Dei website."

At the time, Zulandi was in New York staying with a daughter at the Sloan-Kettering Institute. (She later passed away). Zulandi discovered from the web site that Opus Dei's American headquarters is in New York, and decided to drop by.

"I was in search of meaning," Zulandi said. "But I was still pretty wary when I approached them."

Zulandi said he met an Opus Dei priest who seemed "a regular guy," and he began attending evenings of recollection sponsored by the group. He continued attending activities when he returned to Northern Virginia, and in June 2006 he "whistled," which is Opus Dei's internal lingo for the decision to join.

Zulandi said Opus Dei's emphasis on "the sanctification of work" gave his professional activity "more meaning than I had ever perceived ? that was terribly appealing."

Zulandi said putting together complicated deals "with a lot of money on the table" means some "hard-nosed" negotiations, and it can be difficult to find spiritual significance.

"You're dealing with so many third parties -- lawyers, insurance companies, analysts, and they all claim to add

value, but a lot of the time what they're really doing is billing hours," he said. "In the last couple of years, Opus Dei has helped me to put a different spin on it. We have to be charitable to each other, not bleed each other dry. There's no point in just putting a notch in the belt that's of no benefit to anyone."

Marc Carroggio, spokesperson for Opus Dei in Rome, said that he has no way of knowing how many Zulandis there are out there, but said that so far 8-10 people in Opus Dei centers have told him of a new member whose first contact was *The Da Vinci Code*. Carroggio said his guess is that there may be "dozens" rather than "hundreds" of such*Da Vinci Code* converts.

For a group whose worldwide membership is just 85,000, however, that still makes Dan Brown a gift that keeps on giving.

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