

The Holy Grail

A Spiritual Quest

What do the Knights of the Round Table, Indiana Jones, and the characters of “The Da Vinci Code” have in common – aside from movie adaptations? They all participate in a quest for the legendary Holy Grail, but what they find is something beyond the Grail itself.

The many legends and diverse interpretations have added detail and assorted richness to the mythology of the Holy Grail throughout history. In addition to the cultural phenomenon over its anti-Catholicism, the popularity of “The Da Vinci Code” has led to renewed interest in the nature and history of the Grail. What was it? What became of it? Where might it be found if it exists?

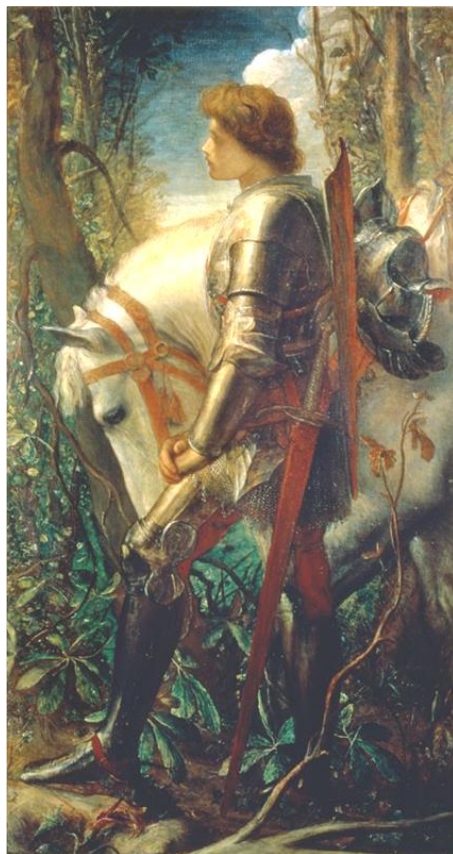
Since, according to Scriptures, Christ’s disciples did not fully understand the significance of His ministry until they received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost – fifty-three days after the Last Supper – one can imagine that (after such time) the actual cup may well have disappeared into history. The resulting speculation is a rich tradition of mythology and folklore in which the Holy Grail not only has come to represent the

Eucharistic Cup, but also reflects a number of traditions of faith and history. One speculation is that the Grail symbolizes the Church itself, born from the blood and water that flowed from the side of Christ on the Cross. Another is that it symbolizes a particular level of spiritual purity, mysticism, and connection with God.

Of the historical legends, the most widely known is that of Joseph of Arimathea, who used the Grail to catch the blood of the crucified Christ, after which his son, Josephus, took the Grail to *England*. Another legend is that the Grail is a bloodline connected to the family and offspring of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, in which is included an ancient monarchy of *France* (do I detect a hint of nationalism “encoded” in these legends?). The

later is featured in “The Da Vinci Code” and in such works as “Holy Blood, Holy Grail”.

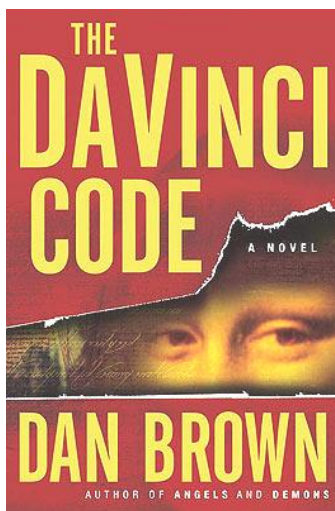
The most celebrated grail stories are found in the legends of King Arthur and his Knights. Aside from its description as a “cup” or “chalice” the Holy Grail of Arthurian legend is never described in great detail. Rather, more is said to illustrate the



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effect its presence has and the sustenance it provides. Further, it elusively appears and disappears at various locations as if it has a will of its own – very similar to the movement of the Holy Spirit. In Sir Thomas Mallory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* Lancelot, Bors, Perceval and Galahad participate in the grail quest. At the end of each story it is told why the particular knight will or will not find the Grail. The reasons are essentially spiritual: Lancelot is too promiscuous, Bors is too violent and Perceval is too easily led astray. In the end, Galahad proves worthy to find the Grail, whereupon he retires from knight-hood, reigns as king of the Grail City and eventually dies. Other traditions tell of different knights finding the Grail – Sir Perceval being the most common after Galahad. In all of these stories, the quest becomes a search for spiritual purity in the midst of the violent Middle Ages.

In the movie "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade", the sequel to "Raiders of the Lost Ark", the adventurer-archeologist takes up the Grail quest that his father, Henry Jones, began when Indiana was a boy. In



the film, the Grail is an actual cup and the quest includes father and Son discovering and decoding clues found in medieval history. The journey taken by Indiana and his father, Henry, however, goes beyond the

quest for an historical relic (which in the end is again lost). It becomes a quest in which father and son overcome their previous alienation and rediscover each other. In the film's finale, it is not the quest for the Grail that drives Indiana, but the desire to save his mortally wounded father. During the final steps before the Grail is found, Indiana must dig deep within himself to test his knowledge as an historian and the caliber of his own faith.

Even "The Da Vinci Code" cannot escape this pattern – despite the obvious anti-Catholic slant. In Dan Brown's disparaging bestseller the Holy Grail is not a cup, but the secret royal bloodline of Jesus and Mary Magdalene (Chs 58-60). The Priory of Sion, a mysterious secret society, protects the documented proof of this lineage. Leonardo da Vinci allegedly belonged to the Priory, encoding clues to this secret in artworks like the "Virgin of the Rocks" and "The Last Supper". As the story goes: there is a centuries old conspiracy by the Catholic Church to (in a nutshell) cover up this lineage so as to maintain a Vatican, male dominated Christianity (Ch 55) and suppress the worship of the goddess (or sacred feminine) manifested in ceremonies of liturgical orgies and ritual gang-rape reminiscent of ancient pagan fertility rites designed for men to achieve an authentic experience of the divine (Ch 74). (One can but wonder why women's-lib has been conspicuously quiet about this particular lurid detail of the book).

But I digress! In the book's final resolution, what is found by characters Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu, like the Arthurian knights and Indiana Jones, goes beyond the actual search for the Holy Grail.

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For Langdon, the book ends with him pausing to pray after finding (*maybe*) the fabled resting place of Mary Magdalene. Sophie comes to a greater knowledge of her identity as she rediscovers her long lost family – and that she is supposedly a descendant of Jesus and Mary Magdalene (?!). Here again, the quest leads the characters to greater personal and spiritual illumination – albeit somewhat manufactured. (It is, after all, a book of fiction.)

As contrived as “The Da Vinci Code” may be, what was sensationalized in order to malign the integrity of the Catholic Church has resulted in a renewed search for a Holy Grail. This quest is taken not by fictional or legendary characters, but by many of the very readers of “The Da Vinci Code” itself. Like all grail quests, this search leads not to a cup (or for that matter a secret bloodline), but to something larger: a better knowledge and appreciation of art and history, and a greater renewal in matters of faith.

In matters of art, “The Da Vinci Code” has caused many, including myself, to study Leonardo da Vinci and learn more about his personal artistic style and the common artistic motifs of his time. Among these is the typical characterization of John the Apostle and other young men portrayed in artworks of that period, including da Vinci’s “The Last Supper”. Another motif is the thin reed-like staff topped with a cross; a symbol of John the Baptist included in such artworks as da Vinci’s “Virgin of the Rocks”.

In matters of history, the popularity of “The Da Vinci Code” has led to a rise in tourism at the many sites featured in the

novel. This will no doubt result in docents and tour guides telling the authentic history of these sites to tourists who ask questions provoked by the novel. It has led many to learn more about our Church’s history of ecumenical councils, from Nicea to Vatican II. It has directed some to learn about the tradition of Mary Magdalene, whereupon they find that the Church was so determined to suppress and slander her (as the novel claims) that it declared her a saint, gave her a feast day and still celebrates her as the first witness of the resurrection. (No slanderous cover-up there!)

Finally, in matters of faith and spirituality, many readers are exploring the traditions and history of Catholicism and rediscovering the Holy Grail of their faith. They are learning about the history and development of Church teachings. They are appreciating the particulars of our tradition. They are even discovering that the Church has not suppressed the idea of “sacred feminine” – although our version and celebration of it is somewhat less vulgar – but that the “sacred feminine” is affirmed and recognized in Holy Mother Church, the Bride of Christ, symbolized in perhaps the most sacred female of all: the Blessed



Virgin Mary, Image, Model and Mother of the Church. Even Mary Magdalene (the other Mary) affirms the hope of rising from sinfulness to sanctity by the grace of Christ’s redemption.

When all is said and done, those of a weaker faith, who lack spiritual maturity and possess the naiveté of Sir Perceval, may be well advised to avoid “The Da Vinci Code” lest it lead them astray. For such people novels like “The Da Vinci Code” are not reasons, but excuses to doubt their faith and

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the traditions of the Church. For the rest of us, “The Da Vinci Code” has provoked a new quest for the Holy Grail, but not as a sacred cup. Like the Arthurian Knights, Indiana Jones and other Grail seekers we find something very different, and far more enriching. As Catholics we discovered a growing interest in art, Church history,

spirituality, and renewal in the many elements of our faith. All this, sparked by the controversy over a modern anti-Catholic mystery novel. (Imagine that!)

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May 26, 2006