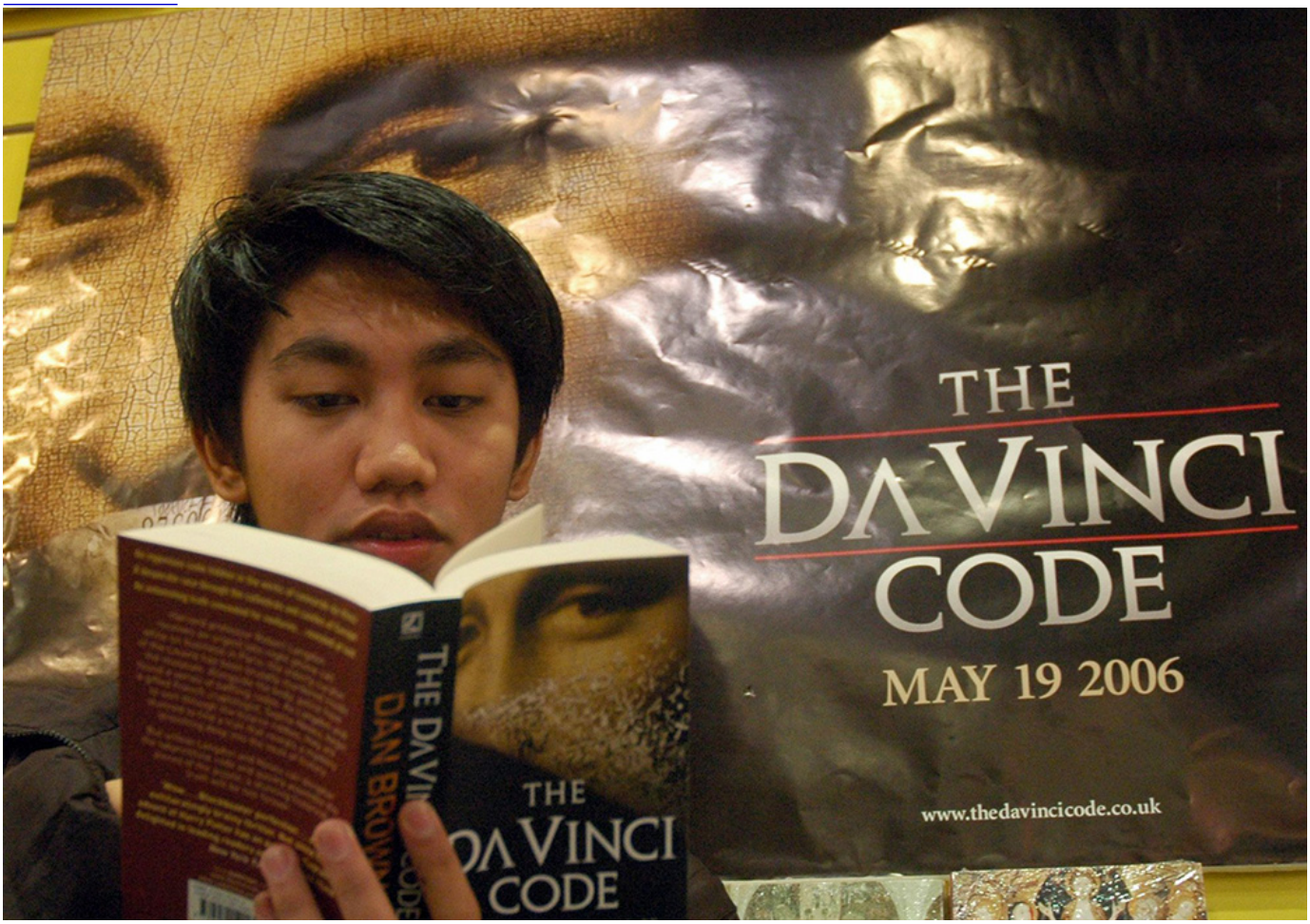
Opinion

NCR Voices



A man reads *The Da Vinci Code* at a bookstore in Manila, Philippines, on May 13, 2006. The film adaptation was released in 2006. Fr. Andrew Greeley wrote a book review of Dan Brown's novel for National Catholic Reporter in 2003. (CNS/Reuters/Joseph Agcaoli)



by James V. Grimaldi

Executive Editor

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(NCR logo/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

Many famous writers' bylines have graced the pages of the National Catholic Reporter in the past six decades.

In 2003, a blockbuster novel that later became a blockbuster movie, *The Da Vinci Code*, was reviewed by one of the most famous Catholic writers in the past century. The NCR reviewer was Fr. Andrew Greeley, whom The New York Times described in his 2013 obituary as "priest, scholar, preacher, social critic, storyteller and scold."

Greeley was prolific. He wrote more than 120 books, both scholarly and popular fiction, with at least 10 hitting the Times' bestseller list. He also wrote for NCR at least 50 times. Here is his review of *The Da Vinci Code*. It has some wonderful lines in it. Enjoy.

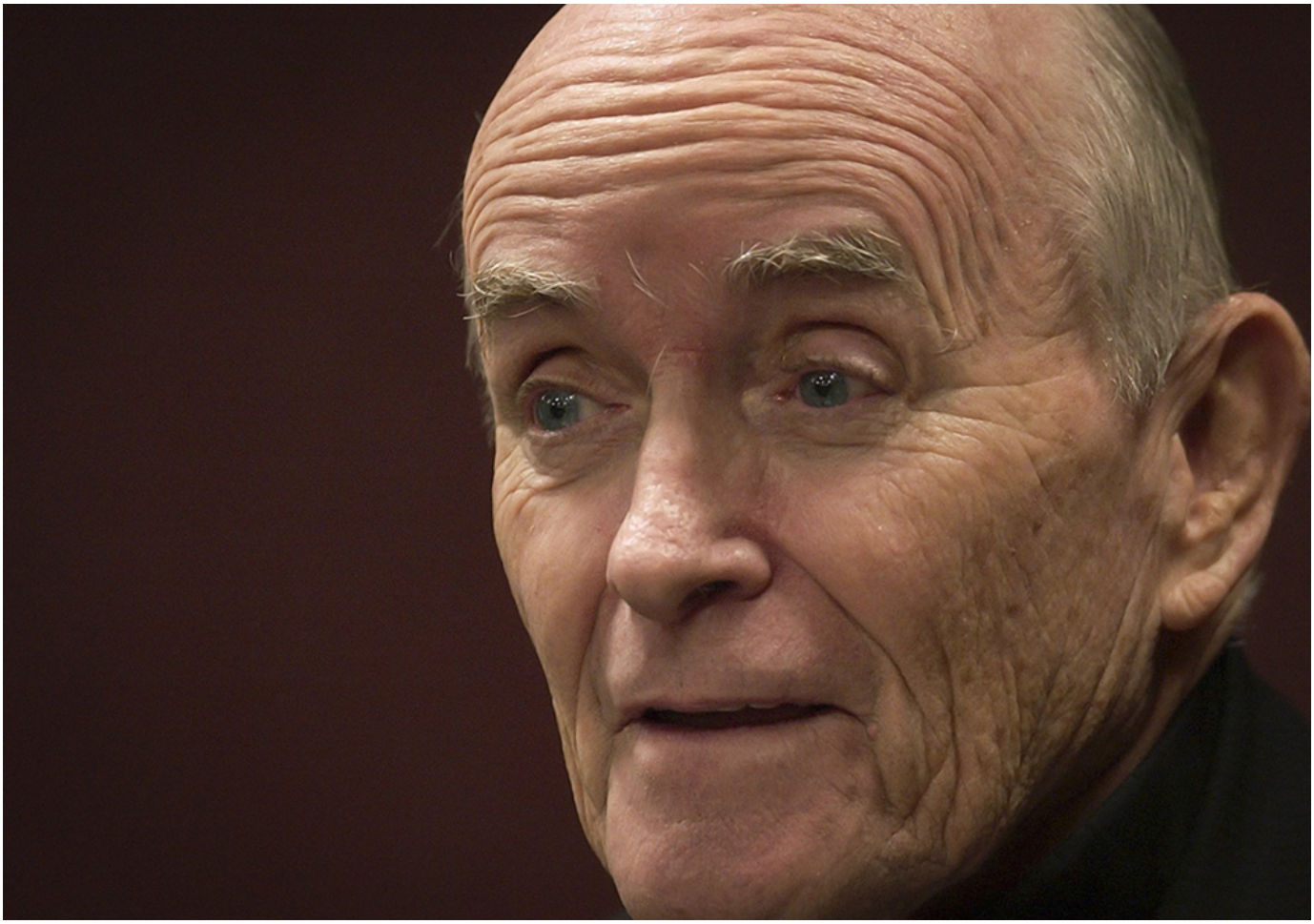
DaVinci Code is more fantasy than fact

Reviewed by ANDREW GREELEY

Dan Brown's fast-paced, intricately plotted second novel deserves to be on *The New York Times* bestseller list. It is a skillfully written read, complete with secret codes, anagrams, elaborate technology, pagan sex orgies, sudden reversals of fortune, age-old conspiracies, pre-Christian fertility cults, the Knights Templar, Gnostic gospels, corrupt cops, brutal murders, feminist "theory" and frantic midnight rides through Paris. The battle over control of the Holy Grail in which the two protagonists (a Harvard professor and a French police cryptologist) are caught up is between the "Priory of Sion" and Opus Dei. The former has been given charge of the Holy Grail, which might reveal secrets that will severely damage Christianity. The latter has been charged by the Vatican with destroying the priory and the secrets of the Grail.

The priory struggles to keep alive a religion of balance between male and female (celebrated in ritual intercourse) which Constantine crushed out of Christianity to strengthen male power. The Holy Grail is not a chalice but the memory of Mary Magdalene who was the consort of Jesus and the mother of his daughter, Sarah, whose descendents are still alive.

Opus has assigned one of its supernumeraries to kill the leaders of the priory and he does so with a holy zeal, after he has scourged himself according to the customs of the group. In a secret meeting at Castel Gandolfo the Vatican has given the Opus prelate 20 million euros in bearer bonds to finance the killings. It also promised that a planned suppression of Opus would be cancelled. The hit man kills the four top officials in the priory and a nun who tries to prevent him from opening a secret compartment in the Church of San Sulpice. A captain of the judiciary police and certain other folks seem to be involved on the side of Opus.

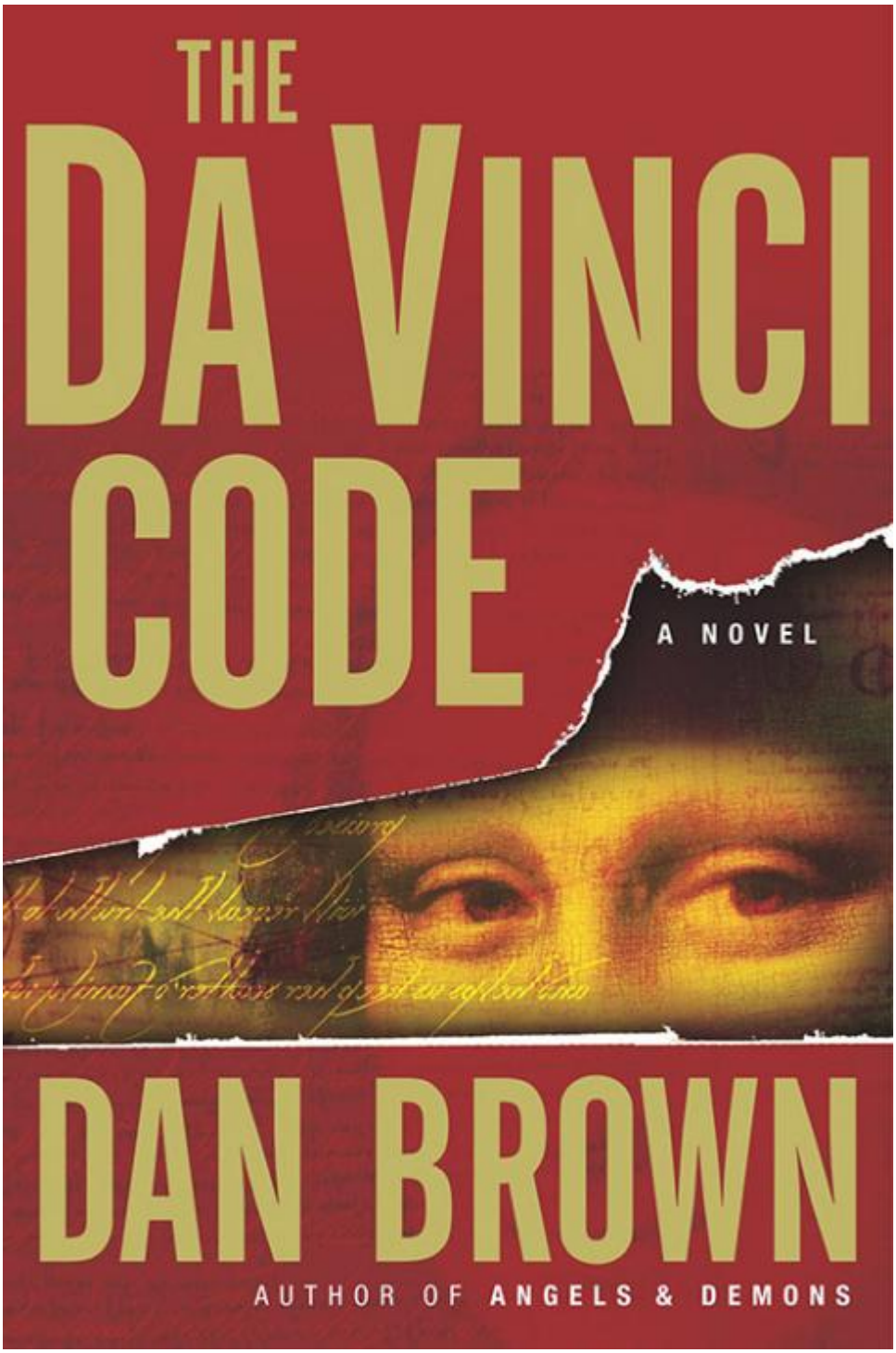


Fr. Andrew Greeley, American sociologist and prolific bestselling author, died May 29, 2013, at his home in Chicago. He was 85. Greeley is pictured in a 2003 file photo addressing a Catholic gathering in Chicago. (CNS/Karen Callaway)

All of this is rich material, guaranteed to keep one turning the pages till the story is finished. Still, the reader must wonder how much of it is fantasy. The answer, I would argue, is that practically all of it is fantasy. Every couple of years a book comes along that promises to tell you who Jesus really was and/or how the church has hidden the "real" Jesus for 19 centuries. Somehow they do not stand up to serious historical examination.

I am hardly a defender of Opus Dei, but I cannot imagine them setting a killer loose in a struggle against a group it considers dangerous. Nor can I imagine the Vatican picking up the tab for serial killings. As usual in such stories, the Roman curia is pictured as smooth, sophisticated schemers who will stop at nothing to preserve the power of the church.

The curia is hardly all that deft and devious, save in its internal plots and conniving — like getting rid of a colleague or undoing an ecumenical council. It is in fact a fractionalized bureaucracy whose heavy-handed personnel would have a hard time conspiring themselves out of a wet paper bag. Poison and daggers were abandoned long ago.



The cover to *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown (CNS)

Is all this stuff anti-Catholic? In a sense it is, and I am waiting for the voice of the indefatigable Bill Donahue of the Catholic League to cry boycott. However, the worst the book will do is upset some dedicated Catholics who won't leave the church anyhow and feed the bigotry of some hard-line anti-Catholics.

For the record, the book is filled with historical inaccuracies. Bruce Boucher of Chicago's Art Institute in an article in *The New York Times* Aug. 3 tore apart Dan Brown's knowledge of Leonardo Da Vinci. Moreover, Brown's use of the term "Vatican" is woefully inaccurate. He depicts the "Vatican" as conspiring with Constantine to suppress the Gnostic gospels in the early 4th century. However, the Vatican Hill was a disorderly cemetery at that time. The "Vatican" is also involved in the suppression of the Templars, though the headquarters of the pope at that time was the Lateran Palace (and the pope was in Avignon anyway). Brown also refers to an individual he calls the Secretariat Vaticana who has charge of papal finances. Presumably he means the secretary of state, though that official does not in fact control Vatican finances. Brown knows little about Leonardo, little about the Catholic church, and little about history.

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Yet something must be said about the Grail legend whose origins are not Christian and whose ambience is more heretical than Catholic. Back in the dim prehistory of Ireland, there was a spring fertility ritual (enacted on Beltane, usually May 1) in which animal blood was poured into a concave stone altar to represent the union of the male and female in the process of generating life. Later tales grew up to explain the rite, the best known of which is the story of Art MacConn. Memories of the ritual and the story floated around in the collective preconscious of the Celtic lands in company with folk tales, myths, bits of history and cycles of legends about such folk as Arthur, Merlin, Parsifal and Tristan. Later writers like Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chretien de Troyes, Thomas Mallory, and Wolfram von Eschenbach combined this bricolage of images and myths into more systematic stories with an overlay of Christianity. However, these storytellers (excepting von Eschenbach) were tainted by the perspectives of Catharist heresy and the results were dreamy, flesh-denying, life-denying legends that violated the older, if pagan, Irish tales. The Grail is always to be sought and never found. This version persists in the work of such disparate artists as Richard Wagner, Alfred Tennyson, Fritz Lowe and Robert Bresson. In the

Irish story, Art gets the magic cup and the magic princess, though, more realistically she, being an Irish woman, gets him -- a happy ending! (see Jean Markale, *Women of the Celts*).

Finally, Brown and his Harvard "symbologist" (semioticist?) are apparently unaware of the most powerful religious symbol of the mother love of God in the last 1,500 years of history, one with a profound impact on painting, music, sculpture, architecture and poetry. Surveys tell us Mary, the mother of Jesus, is one of the four key elements of Catholic religious identity among young people in the United States (along with concern for the poor, the action of God in the sacraments and the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist). Some feminist theologians reject the Mary symbol on the grounds that it was patriarchal in its origin. Granted that like all symbols, the Mary symbol can be and has been misused, the efforts of some writers to cancel out a millennium and a half of rich religious imagery with the shibboleth "patriarchal" (instead of purifying it) can most charitably be described as heroic. How many medieval cathedrals do they propose to destroy? One wonders nevertheless what Dan Brown's reasons were for ignoring the Mary symbol.

This story appears in the **NCR at 60 years** feature series. View the full series.