

Angels & Demons: Everyone's trying to save the church

Sr. Rose Pacatte | May. 13, 2009



Tom Hanks stars as Robert Langdon, Ayelet Zurer as Vittoria Vetra and Armin Mueller-Stahl as Cardinal Strauss in "Angels & Demons." (Photos by Columbia Pictures)

Tom Hanks has awakened from hyper-sleep.

In director Ron Howard's new film, 'Angels & Demons,' Hanks reprises his role as Robert Langdon, a Harvard University 'symbolist,' in a pounding Vatican-centered thriller with a gentle finale that surprises and even inspires. Hanks is trim, engaged, droll, and quite the lecturing action hero -- totally different from his drab, passive persona in the 'The Da Vinci Code' (2006).

One early morning a Vatican official approaches Langdon during a swim and shows him a paper with 'Illuminati' on it. He explains that the Vatican has received threats from this supposedly extinct secret society. Indeed, the pope has died and four cardinals, the 'papabile' -- those most favored to be elected pope -- have been abducted just as the conclave to elect a new pope is about to begin. The Vatican wants Langdon's help to decipher the meaning of the symbol and assess the threat of the resurgence of this secret society before word leaks out and panic ensues.

Sr. Rose Pacatte asks the question [Is Hollywood anti-Catholic?](#) [1]

The Illuminati, Langdon explains, formed in the 17th century to resist the church's persecution of scientists who put the sun, rather than the earth, at the center of the solar system. The society included such scientific greats as Galileo and Bernini. (Historical note: The Illuminati was a small German intellectual association influenced by the Enlightenment that existed briefly in the 18th century.)

Meanwhile, another threat emerges from the Illuminati. A canister containing a particle of 'antimatter' has been stolen and the man who discovered the process, a priest-scientist, murdered. The particle is a potential weapon

of mass destruction, though CERN, an actual Swiss laboratory, intended to harness the discovery as a new source of energy.



The canister is hidden in the Vatican and it is revealed that its

detonation will follow the murder of the four cardinals. CERN scientist Vittoria Vetra, played by Ayelet Zurer, joins Langdon, the Vatican gendarmerie, the papal guard, and Rome's *Carabinieri* to unravel the symbols and clues, rescue the cardinals, save the conclave and find the canister before it is too late.

If the plot doesn't sound complex enough, add in the deceased pope's young camerlengo, the angelic Fr. Patrick McKenna, played by Ewan McGregor, and the seemingly ambitious, tough Cardinal Strauss, played by Armin Mueller-Stahl, who is a kind of devil's advocate. People are not what they seem, however.

In *Angels & Demons*, everyone is trying to save the Catholic church that is trying to save everyone else.

Angels & Demons is a convoluted tale, based partly on fact, partly on Dan Brownian fabrication concocted for his 2000 best-selling novel of the same title. Both are predicated on a common misinformed perception that science and faith are at loggerheads still, almost five centuries after the Galileo debacle, for which Pope John Paul II asked forgiveness when lifting the edict of the Inquisition against Galileo in 1992.

There is an ethical subtext, too, that deftly challenges the scientific community: Science can go too far and once something is discovered, no one controls it anymore, like the atom bomb.

The film diverges from the novel in ways too numerous to detail here. Because the filmmakers, including the prolific Oscar-winning screenwriter Akiva Goldsman (*A Beautiful Mind*), changed a significant thread, it altered the ending. Thus the film is more plausible from both a storytelling and a Catholic perspective. But this does not mean that because the film might make more sense that it is believable. Hardly. It is a fiction, an entertainment.

And as adversarial a premise and as argumentative a plot this may be to some, the film ends respectably on its feet. Cardinal Strauss humbly asks Langdon to write about the church gently in his next book, to which Langdon replies, "I'll try."

Angels & Demons takes place after the events in *The Da Vinci Code*. (The novel *Angels & Demons* was written first.) It is interesting that there is no mention of the feminine divine, although the humor in the film comes from the characters' shared memory of *The Da Vinci Code* adventures.

The Catholic church of *Angels & Demons* is very male. There is mention of the church being built on St. Peter. But there is barely a mention of God at all. It assumes we know. My Catholic imagination fills in the blanks by gestalt.

Further, the film was too violent and about 20 minutes too long.



I do not think 'Angels & Demons' is anti-Catholic. I think that Howard, like many

filmmakers, is fascinated by the Catholic church. That they don't always get it right says more about the ability of us Catholics, perhaps, to articulate our faith and tell our stories, to explain the hope that is in us in ways that respect film as a medium of sight and sound that evokes an emotional response before any other.

William Donohue, who heads the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, is not only engaged in a verbal sparring with Howard over the film's content and Howard's motivation for making it, but has also issued a booklet, *Angels & Demons: More Demonic than Angelic*.

I read the original novel, though it took me two tries to get through it. I could tell *Angels & Demons* was written by someone who didn't know the church well, and it was, after all, in the fiction section of the bookstore. I was in second or third grade when I learned the difference between a true story and fiction. I saw the film. I think it has seeds of the Gospel that appeal to Catholic sensibilities, more than I expected. Most of all, it ends with a quiet humility.

I don't think 'Angels & Demons' will win an Oscar, though it is probably going to hit a home run at the box office. It is a well-made entertainment.

If you run into people who don't trust their own critical abilities or are afraid to see the film, suggest a media-minded approach that asks questions, encourages conversation, is characterized by respect and is rooted in theological reflection: What's going on? What's really going on? Does it make any difference? How can I make a difference?

Sr. Rose Pacatte, a Daughter of St. Paul, is the director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies, an award-winning writer on film and scripture, and a media literacy education specialist who has served on Catholic and ecumenical juries at the Venice, Berlin and Locarno film festivals.

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