

Q&A

Fr. Alex, where is Heaven?

This is a very good question and something that is probably wondered about by most children and adults as well. In books, movies and stories, Heaven is usually shown to be a place of "green pastures," with beautiful rolling hills, puffy white clouds and little angels flying about. Sometimes we even imagine that before we can come to Heaven, we have to pass through "The Pearly Gates," and convince an angel, or St. Peter, that we really do belong there. Some people believe that Heaven is simply a place up above the clouds where you get everything you always wanted on earth but could never have: beautiful cars, all the friends you could ever want, endless stacks of your favorite type of pizza.... I think you get the idea.

For we Orthodox Christians, all of these ideas miss the mark in one way or another. Heaven is definitely an idea that comes directly from our Holy Scriptures and Saints--and one that the Lord Himself talks about, but it is also one that cannot be limited to a "place" as we usually think of it, such as going to a market, playground or movie theater. For us, Heaven is a beautiful, mysterious idea that we know is true but cannot exactly be explained by us. After all, we are not God, but His creation, so it makes sense that we can't understand everything about Him. So there is much we don't know, but we do know this. Heaven, for us, is being with God, being close to Him--never, ever away from Him and never alone. Our Memorial Service describes Heaven as "a place of light, a place of renewed life, a joyous place, shunned alike by pain and sorrow and sighing." So if we think of it in terms of a place, it is the place where God is and a place where He protects and embraces us--where He keeps us warm and we always know we are loved. It is a place of life, thanksgiving, happiness, brightness where there is nothing hurtful, sinful or painful. In this place, He makes us new.

In the end, to be in Heaven is to be with God. We don't know what it will look, feel or taste like. But we don't need to know these things. All we need to know is that we will be with Him forever--and if we trust Him and have faith in His love for us, knowing this is enough.

Is watching the Da Vinci Code a sin?

There has been lots and lots of publicity about this movie, and many people are talking about it and arguing about it. And this means that a lot of people will be seeing the movie and also picking up the book for some summer reading--all of this means that the book and movie will become more and more influential. So, what is all this to us--and is it a sin to watch or read *The Code*?

First of all, you need to know that like most movies and many books, the Da Vinci Code is pure fiction: it uses the names of real, historic figures and places--like Jesus and Rome--but plays with all of the details and realities to create an exciting, mysterious story. Even though the narrator in the book says that everything in it is real, this is just a way for the author, Dan Brown, to make his story seem more real. This is done in lots of

books and movies and is not something new or revolutionary. And remember that just because some of the people, places and historical events that show up in the book are real, it doesn't mean that what Dan Brown says about them are true. It is confusing in this case, though, because Jesus is so important to us--our true God!--and so when an author says strange, untrue and really awful things about Him, it really hurts and confuses us. For instance, in the story-line, it is suggested that Jesus had a romantic relationship with Mary Magdalene, which we know to be untrue and would consider a very cruel and blasphemous thing to say. We know Jesus' only true bride is His Church, of which we are a part, and that St. Mary was a woman whom He loved, taught and ministered to just like He did any other of his friends and Apostles.

So this book and movie are pure fiction and are not to be taken seriously or as any kind of new revelation on our faith. As far as watching the movie or reading the book being a sin--no. If your parents give you permission and you watch it like you would any other piece of fiction, this is not a sinful act. Remember, though, that the very definition of a sin is to "miss the mark." So in the long run, if movies like this, certain shows, and other influences in your life are causing you to miss the mark and get off the path Jesus' has laid out to you, yes, these things then become sinful, because they keep us from God.

Just remember not to believe the hype, to know fact from fiction and truth from lie, and you'll be fine. And never hesitate to come to your parents and me in person to discuss things like this in more detail!

To the boys and girls and young men and women of our parish: Thanks for the incredible questions! Please keep submitting more to me and check in again next month for the latest postings. And again, always email, call, or stop in if you want to talk more about anything.

God bless,

Fr. Alex