

The Da Vinci Code opens strongly: Film panned by critics

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One didn't need a Harvard symbologist to decode this one. With its built-in advantage of a best-seller source novel—and the dependable Ron Howard directing fan favorite Tom Hanks—*The Da Vinci Code* translated fame into box-office success on its first weekend in release.

Its estimated May 19-21 gross was \$77 million, according to the box-office analysis firm Exhibitor Relations—more than the rest of the top ten movies combined.

Though the film didn't make it into the \$100 million club, the preserve of genuine blockbusters like the Harry Potter films, "it's the biggest opening of the year so far," said Paul Dergarabedian, president of Exhibitor Relations. "And \$77 million tells only part of the story; the film also did \$147 million overseas, which shows you the worldwide fervor about this picture. It's really a global phenomenon."

Many film critics panned the movie, and the film drew some laughter from viewers at the Cannes Film Festival. The U.S. Catholic bishops' film office rated it "morally offensive" the day before the film opened. It had few advance screenings.

Some moviegoers had called for a boycott of the film on religious grounds, while others announced that they would see it simply to break the boycott; a third faction urged fans to see the family-friendly *Over the Hedge* instead. Indeed, that animated film drew \$37.2 million for second place.

"The strategy of keeping the film under wraps and letting the controversy build only seemed to raise awareness to a fever pitch. . . . If anything, the protests only enhanced the box office," Dergarabedian said. "Any time there's a protest, people want to see the movie themselves, to make up their own minds. All of it just helped their marketing."

In the end, that marketing helped place *The Da Vinci Code* well ahead of the premieres of other summer movies, like *Mission: Impossible III* and *Poseidon*, as well

as the initial revenues for previously picketed religious films such as *Dogma* (which made \$8 million during its 1999 opening) and *The Last Temptation of Christ* (which managed only \$401,000 in the first few days of its initial, limited 1988 release).

However, *The Da Vinci Code* still stands behind *The Passion of the Christ*, which made a solid \$84 million during its first weekend run. -*Religion News Service*