

Entertainment



ANGELS & DEMONS

As a papal conclave meets to elect a new Pope, a professor and physicist race against time, trying to figure out a series of clues to find four kidnapped cardinals before they are executed and an antimatter device is detonated in Vatican City. Dramatic Thriller/PG-13.

The Pope has just died and Camerlengo Patrick McKenna (Ewan McGregor) is overseeing his funeral while also temporarily serving as acting head of state of Vatican City, all while head elector Cardinal Strauss (Armin Mueller-Stahl) and the rest of the College of Cardinals meet in a papal conclave to select the next pontiff. Yet, the Catholic Church has another and potentially more worrisome development with which it must contend.

Not only have four cardinals been kidnapped by an assassin (Nikolaj Lie Kaas) with the threat that they'll be executed one per hour, but a vial containing experimental antimatter has also been stolen from a CERN particle collider and is now hidden somewhere in Vatican City. With limited battery power keeping it in stasis, it must be found before midnight when it will explode with the equivalent force of a five kiloton bomb.

Accordingly, Inspector Olivetti (Pierfrancesco Favino) with the Vatican police has sent his subordinate, Claudio Vincenzi (David Pasquesi), to retrieve American professor Robert Langdon (Tom Hanks) to help out. Due to his past investigation and writings, Langdon is no favorite of the Church, but his expertise is desperately needed within the confines of this limited timeline. He quickly discerns that a note left by the assassin involves the Illuminati, a group of scientists and freethinkers who were driven into an underground radical movement by the Church centuries ago with the threat that they would one day get their revenge on religion.

Accompanied by CERN physicist Vittoria Vetra (Ayelet Zurer) who's intimately knowledgeable about the missing antimatter, Langdon starts to decipher what he believes is a clue of trails, but runs into resistance from Commander Richter (Stellan Skarsgard) and his right-hand man, Chartrand (Thure Lindhardt), of the Swiss Guard. They are aware of Langdon's reputation and thus wary of allowing him access to the Vatican archives he states he needs to solve their problem. From that point on, and as McKenna tries to persuade Cardinal Strauss to evacuate Vatican City, Robert and Vittoria race against time to follow the clues and hopefully save the kidnapped cardinals and prevent the antimatter device from destroying much of Rome.

Our Take: 5.5 out of 10

Back in 2006, I wrote the following about a certain film that was generating a lot of controversy and thus free publicity buzz based on its religious subject matter: "Despite its obvious fictional trappings, the novel and now, by default, the movie adaptation, has

some worked up into a lather. To which all I can say -- and to quote the ads from horror films back in the '60s and '70s -- 'Keep repeating to yourself -- it's only a movie. It's only a movie...'"

That film, of course, was director Ron Howard's adaptation of the mega popular "The Da Vinci Code," and partly thanks to the efforts of the Vatican (although it wasn't their intention -- or was it? -- dear conspiracy-minded readers out there) as well as millions of fans who read Dan Brown's original novel, the film went on to gross somewhere in the neighborhood of \$760 million worldwide.

Realizing neither the Church nor Christianity were affected by the flick, yet apparently not wanting to help the movie adaptation of "Angels & Demons" -- the prequel to "Da Vinci Code" in literary form but moved into the status of a sequel here -- the Vatican has deemed that while they don't agree with the movie, it's basically harmless.

That's unlike the 2006 effort that threatened to bore everyone to death via a number of factors, including but not limited to preposterousness, mediocre to bad acting, too much exposition and explanation, laborious pacing, taking itself too seriously and, most notably, one truly awful haircut for lead Tom Hanks.

Like those long and unruly locks, this ad-

aptation of Brown's 2000 novel of the same name has had some of its excesses trimmed away, resulting in a more stylish and satisfying production. While some of the same problems that bedeviled the predecessor are still around, Howard, returning scribe Akiva Goldsman and new addition David Koepp do their best to keep them from dragging the picture down into the same degree of non-engaging monotony and dullness that made the original a decidedly less than critic-lauded offering.

Clearly less potentially controversial for Catholics and Christians than last time around (although there's still past and present wrongdoings by the Church, along with cover-ups, secrets, interference and such), the film is more nimble and thus a more entertaining if similarly ludicrous at times dramatic thriller. Case in point, and I might be wrong in general, but this might be the first non science fiction film where antimatter plays a pivotal role in moving the plot forward.

In short, some of the highly volatile stuff has been stolen and four cardinals abducted just as they and others of the College of Cardinals were meeting in a papal conclave to select the next Pope. Accordingly, skeptical researcher Robert Langdon (Hanks) is called in to decipher nebulous clues pointing to

the Illuminati (scientists and free thinkers forced underground into a hidden but radical organization bent on eventual science bests religion revenge).

He and his new female sidekick -- Ayelet Zurer replacing Audrey Tautou, although not as the same character but again sans any sort of romance or sexual chemistry between them -- then race against time to solve the clues and try to save the cardinals and Vatican City before the latter goes boom.

Throw in a number of characters that on the surface appear to be good -- Ewan McGregor as a caring and concerned priest, Pierfrancesco Favino as a member of the Vatican Police -- and bad -- Stellan Skarsgard as the commander of the Swiss Guard and Armin Mueller-Stahl as a cardinal who might just be using his staunch traditionalism as a means of getting that coveted top seat in the Church -- and you pretty much have the plot.

Performances are generally better across the board than in the first film, but character development -- as oft occurs in thrillers -- pretty much takes a backseat to plot mechanics and such. Accordingly, what we're left with isn't anywhere near great but clearly is more entertaining and satisfying than its predecessor. "Angels & Demons" rates as a 5.5 out of 10. Courtesy of Screenit.com •