The Power and the Glory of Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ”

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- by Dr. Robert Moynihan

I received a phone call from my colleague, Delia Gallagher, at about noontime yesterday: “They’re screening Mel Gibson’s film at Cinecitta this afternoon, and we’re invited.”

We took the metro from "Ottaviano," near the Vatican, to Cinecitta, Rome's "Hollywood"; it's a straight shot, no changes.

We stood in front of the entrance, bought a sandwich and a candy bar at a kiosk. A cold February wind blew.

Father Thomas Williams, an American priest and Dean of Theology for the Legionary of Christ seminary in Rome, came up out of the metro with two other Americans in tow. We greeted each other and walked into Cinecitta ("Cinema City").

Vittorio Messori, arguably Italy's leading Catholic journalist, was there to view the film and write a review for Italy's leading daily, Corriere della Sera.

Father Augustine Di Noia, an American official at the Vatican's chief doctrinal office, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, was there.

And so was the wife of Judas... the wife of the Italian actor who plays Judas in the film.

There were about 12 of us in all in the screening room.

"The film arrived this morning from America," Father Williams said. "This is the first showing in Italy, and one of the first showings in the world, of the final edited version. It's film now, not digital. What we will see is the film which will open in America in 10 days."

The lights dimmed. The film began.

I wept.

I wept for the implacable inevitability of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, the ruin of his body, which, yes, is presented as the temple of God, but which reminded me of my own body, of my sons' bodies — how many times I have bandaged their little, and not-so-little, cuts! — of the bodies of soldiers and civilians being blown apart in Iraq... and in Israel... of the bodies of millions in the past century... of the bodies of those who suffered and died in the concentration camps...

It is a violent film.
So violent that I wanted to turn away.

So violent that I wanted to say, "Mel, you went too far..."

But it is a violent world.

It is a violent world where the dignity of human beings is violated and ground down in a way that all of us see, and most of us grow accustomed to, though we ought not to...

The overwhelming sense I took from Gibson's film was of man's senseless brutality toward man.

Toward this one man.

Toward this carpenter from Nazareth, this Jesus.

Toward all men.

This film is a brutal depiction of brutal behavior which asks all of us — Christians, Jews, Muslims, atheists, all of us — to cease such behavior, because it is cruel, because it is heartless, because it is against God's will for us not to have hearts...

In this sense, the film is not and cannot be anti-Semitic.

There is no subtitle in the film in which the Jewish high priest, Caiaphas, or anyone else, says, "Let his blood be upon us and upon our children."

**Mary**

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is splendid.

It is her sorrow that made me weep.

She reminded me of my wife, watching over our sons.

She reminded me of all mothers, who see their sons falling out of their hands into the hands of the world, the hands of men.

Her face is iconic, almost expressionless.

Her face is the most expressive I have ever seen.

She stares into the camera, into our own eyes, and her sorrow for her son fills us with sorrow.
The Passion – Dr. Robert Moynihan

But there is something else. She is... not serene, serenity would be too strong a word. She is... not accepting, no not exactly accepting, she is not "accepting" her son's brutal beating and crucifixion. She is partaking... sharing... "co-bearing." Perhaps that's the best word: she is bearing together with Jesus, her son, every blow, every humiliation.

It is extraordinary to see, perhaps the most extraordinary thing in the movie.

The Devil

A face appears.

Who is that? We don't know. It seems a person, some character not named. Expressionless.

Wait... is that evil in the expression? Or am I mistaken... No, there is no expression, no flicker of eyes or tensing of lips, no expression at all. So there is no evil, nothing sinister. It's okay.

Then, suddenly... through the mists in the garden of Gethsemane, this haunting, haunted face begins to tempt and accuse Jesus, and so we realize it IS the devil.

A shiver of recognition.

The devil has no horns, but is horrific.

No actions... but is the motive force of pure evil behind all the acts of cruelty that spill out onto the screen, into our faces.

A brilliant performance.

During the struggle in the garden to arrest Jesus, his eye is struck. From that moment until the end of the film — except in flashbacks — one eye is black and shut.

I hated that. I wanted to see his whole face more, both his eyes. I think: "I wish Mel had waited until the middle of the film to strike Jesus' eye..."

And then I think: "What a foolish thing to wish..."

In this final version of the film, there are a couple of "flashbacks" added that were not in previous versions.

That's good.

I wanted more flashbacks.

During the scourging, I longed for a flashback, anything to bring us back to a time when things were good, when Jesus was living with his parents, or when he was preaching.
But Mel has decided to leave us only a couple of glimpses of those happier times.

And one such moment, when Jesus splashes water on his mother, then gives her a kiss, is the happiest moment in the film.

**Music**

In some earlier screenings, there was no music at all. In some, the musical score was still provisional.

In this final version, it is powerful, at times hypnotic, riveting.

The intermixture of choral and instrumental is at times majestic.

Once, I wanted to stop my ears, as Jesus falls on the Via Dolorosa, and the whips of the soldiers lash him, and the music comes out in a staccato, like machine guns, like monkeys pounding coconuts on tree-trunks in the jungle.

I wanted it all to stop...

**The Languages**

The use of Latin — yes, I could understand the Latin dialogue, or at least a bit of it — and of Aramaic, distinguishes this film from all previous films about Jesus.

I thought it worked.

In fact, it began to seem so natural to me that 2,000 years seemed to condense, like an accordion, and Jerusalem of the time of Christ began to seem a bit like Rome today, or New York, or Moscow. It didn't seem so far.

It is said that people who speak Arabic and Hebrew may be able to follow some of the Aramaic dialogue (indeed, some believe the film may have an unexpected impact among Jews and Muslims precisely for this reason); I could not.

But I thought it was brilliantly done. Others may find errors in pronunciation or vocabulary, but for me it was convincing, and powerful.

This was a choice Gibson made and stuck to against all sorts of criticism ("the film will be a flop if you do it in Latin and Aramaic; are you crazy?"). I think he was right; it is one of the most extraordinary and powerful aspects of this film.

Before the film began, the Italian producer, who was also present at our screening, said that, though he was a Catholic, he had never really understood the Catholic Mass until he saw this film.
There is no doubt that there is a "eucharistic" dimension to this film, which makes it more profoundly "religious" or Christian — but also Jewish, as I will explain in a minute — than any other film about Christ's passion.

Gibson accomplishes this by setting the moment of the nailing of the cross, the moment of the crucifixion, in which the body of Jesus is finally broken, against a flashback in which he is about the break the bread at the Last Supper, which was a Passover Seder. The meaning is clear: the bread broken at the Passover meal, which Jesus says "is my body," is the body being crucified.

This is of course the central action of every Catholic Mass — the Last Supper is commemorated, and the death of Christ on the cross is "mystically" (that is, truly but not in a physical way visible to us here and now) both recalled and re-enacted. The theology of this is of course a matter of dispute, especially between Protestants and Catholics, but also between traditional and progressive Catholics.

Gibson, in my view, has expressed in this film the theology of his own traditional Catholic belief: that what happened 2,000 years ago in Jerusalem, at the Last Supper and on the cross, happens today, mystically, at a Catholic Mass.

The film is "eucharistic" — a depiction of the religious sacrifice which constitutes, in Catholic belief, the initiation of a new world, redeemed from sin, a world of eternal life.

It is in this sense that the film is also very Jewish — which will seem a surprising statement to some who have followed the polemics over this film.

The film is informed by and infused with the Jewish concept of sacrificial atonement — the "sacrificial goat" or "scapegoat" was of course part of Jewish religious practice during the time of the Temple sacrifices.

This is why Gibson chooses to introduce the final phase of the film with a "divine tear" — a teardrop shed by God.

The little sphere of water fills the screen and falls to earth at the moment of Jesus' death.

A great wind roars, the soldiers, who are breaking the leg bones of the two thieves, so that their bodies sag and they die of suffocation, flee — after one pierces Jesus in the side with his spear to make sure he is truly dead, and water from his lungs gushes out, mixed with a stream of blood, though never breaking his legs — and in the Temple, the veil over the Holy of Holies, the innermost sanctuary, is rent.

Certainly there is a polemic here with Judaism, or with one form of or stage in Judaism, which some might say is the sole form.
But there is no "anti-Semitism." Theologians, and simple believers, will have to grapple with the relationship between Jesus — who is thoroughly Jewish, and surrounded by Jewish followers — and Judaism, but there is no question of denying the very Jewish tradition which produced Jesus. It is the soil out of which Jesus — and this film — grows.

The Resurrection

One hates to give away the ending of a film, but in this case the ending is widely known.

Christ rises.

His risen body is no longer ruined, though his hands still bear the marks of the nails that were pounded through them so ferociously (by Gibson himself, by the way — Gibson's only appearance in the film is as the man hammering the nails into Christ's hands).

I read Gibson's ending, as Christ strides forth, as the beginning of the 2,000 years that have since passed. I see it from the Catholic perspective, as the beginning of the Church, a "mystical" human society, animated by a risen spirit, this Christ who was crucified, at the center of history, giving meaning to history — but not ending history.

And the polemics over this film are part of that still unfolding history.

In a few days, barring a cataclysm, the film will be in theaters, and millions will see it.

And millions will weep.

But that weeping will not be channeled into hatred of any group or groups; rather, it will be channeled into a renewed commitment to the central message of the man who is depicted suffering in this film: "Love one another."

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