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## **The Passion: Christ's Passion & Gibsons' Lynching**

*Previewing Mel Gibson's Passion*

**by Fr. Michael Morris, O.P.**

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In September of 2002, I presented a paper with slides to the *Magnificat* Congress in New York City. The subject of that paper was the impact of the visions of the 19th-century mystic Anne Catherine Emmerich on the arts, particularly in her graphic account of the Passion of Christ. It was a topic in which I had long been interested, both as an art historian and as a priest. Afterward, a knowledgeable and well-connected Jesuit came up to the podium and told me that actor Mel Gibson was planning to make a film on the very topic upon which I had just spoken, a movie that would portray the Passion of Christ through the lens of the Catholic mystic. While I immediately responded with surprise and excitement, the Jesuit tempered my enthusiasm with caution. He was in possession of the script, and he said that it was filled with difficulties. He later allowed me to look at it and see for myself.

When I read the script, my first impression was that it was exceedingly violent. But I was even more dismayed to find out that the movie was not drawing its inspiration exclusively from the visions of the stigmatic Sr. Emmerich. The Gibson film was also using some of the material left by another visionary nun, Mary of Agreda, who lived in the 17th century, and whose account of the Passion of Christ seemed to be based on an altogether different kind of mysticism, one that was more pious and fantastic than the comparatively newsreel-like story credited to Emmerich. As with the problem of too many cooks in the kitchen, could a director mix his mystics and still come out with a product that was cohesive and compelling?

When I first read that now-outdated script, I certainly did not think so, but having just previewed a near-to-finished cut of the film, the answer is now a resounding yes. Mel Gibson will unveil to the public on Ash Wednesday of 2004 what must be the most powerful cinematic account of the Passion of Jesus Christ ever made. Certainly it is the most Catholic account ever brought to the screen. But the production has been fraught with peril and controversy, causing both the director and his lead actor, Jim Caviezel, to suffer considerably.

Before principal photography on the production began in Italy in the winter of 2002, I managed to have an hour-long interview with Jim Caviezel over the phone. Ever since I saw him in the film *The Thin Red Line*, it was obvious to me that he had the potential to play Jesus. Caviezel jokingly claims that Gibson chose him for the role because he was 33 years old and his initials are J.C. But there was more to it than that. The actor does have an ethereal presence on the

screen, and an almost mystical stare that is enhanced by his penetrating eyes. Perhaps Gibson chose the actor because he has some of the same star quality that he himself exhibited in his earlier years. Now too old to play Christ, Gibson chose Caviezel in part because he would not provide cinematic history with yet another Nordic fair-haired Jesus. The actor's dark looks will become overtly Mediterranean, and his blue eyes will be colored brown in the final version of the work.

Jim Caviezel's own story is worth telling for somewhere along the road to Hollywood stardom he fell off his proverbial horse and heard a voice from Heaven speak to him. During the filming of *The*

*Count of Monte Cristo* in Ireland, the actor found himself having to choose between God and Mammon.

Supported by his devoutly Catholic wife, a trip to Medjugorje helped intensify his own lackluster faith

and fortify him against the temptations that await all those who find themselves catapulted to celebrity. The actor said that his wife introduced him to one of the mystics of Medjugorje, Ivan Dragicevic, who told Caviezel that the Virgin Mary was calling the actor to draw closer to her Son, and to pray more earnestly from his heart. The actor became emotional when recounting his conversion experience, of re-igniting his own Catholic faith and trying to become a better Christian. The mystic and the actor became good friends, and before filming began on Gibson's movie, Jim went on retreat with Ivan in preparation for his role as Jesus. Certainly this was a first for any actor playing Jesus in a Hollywood production. When Cecil B. DeMille was making *King of Kings* in 1927, he had to police his lead actor, H.B. Wamer, lest his cinematic Christ be caught drunk in a bar or found in a brothel. A few decades later, another actor playing the role impregnated his girl friend in the course of the production and provided her with an abortion. Thus, it is rare indeed that a Hollywood actor would actually want to take on the role of Jesus by spiritually preparing for it.

In my interview with Caviezel, he told me that he wanted the Church Triumphant to aid him in the moviemaking process as both he and Gibson, as part of the Church Militant, attempted to bring Christ's

redemptive message to a cynical and increasingly secular world. For this purpose he collected a number of relics of various saints: Francis, Padre Pio, Anthony of Padua, Maria Goretti, and Genesius (the

patron saint of actors), and had them sewn, along with a Carmelite scapular: into his loin cloth for the crucifixion scenes. He was also seeking a relic of the True Cross that might be implanted in the cinematic

cross. This was later given to him by Mother Angelica. Fortified by his own *Anna Sancti*, the actor charged off to Italy to film *The Passion of the Christ* in the same rural medieval town where Pier Paolo

Pasolini had filmed his landmark movie *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* nearly four decades ear

lier. Hailed by critics in its day, Pasolini's beautifully austere film has suffered somewhat from its time-

worn depiction of Jesus as an unapproachable rebel, filled with condemnations and Marxist-style rants.

Banking on the idea that audiences today are looking for a kinder Jesus, one who is a hero, who cares for them, who loves them, and who suffers for them even unto death, Gibson took his crew first to Matera and then to Rome to start the production. While they were filming in Italy, I tried to contact Caviezel by email, phoned his assistant, and even sent him my illustrated Magnificat paper online hoping that some of the points in it would challenge what I saw as real deficiencies in the script. The version I read was so relentlessly violent, without any of the relief that Emmerich resorts to by intersecting such brutal scenes with sublime symbolism. For instance, in Emmerich's horrific account of the nailing of Christ's body to the cross, she ends the gruesome episode by recounting that just as the cross was being lifted into place the trumpets from the Temple resounded, signifying that the Passover lambs had been sacrificed. I had told the actor before he left that unless some of that beautiful and important symbolism were injected into the film, this movie of Christ's Passion would be nothing more than one physical torture scene after another, devoid of any higher spiritual significance. Caviezel told me that he would do what he could, but reminded me that he was only an actor, not the director, and that Gibson was in charge of the production. Indeed, this has become Gibson's own personal and spiritual enterprise, one that has made his private life become very public. As a consequence, it has cost him an enormous amount of bad press and personal anguish.

Anyone who has read the newspapers in the last nine months would know that the production has been vilified for being, foremost among other things, anti-Semitic. With The New York Times leading the attack, followed by the Los Angeles Times, Gibson has been forced to defend his integrist Catholic beliefs and repudiate wild stories claiming that his father, a longtime figure in the Catholic Traditionalist movement, is a Holocaust denier. With all the intensity of the Pharisees calling for Christ's crucifixion in Gibson's own movie, the Hollywood media elite and many of their newspaper counterparts seem to be planning a professional lynching for the actor-turned-director. In years past he incurred their wrath for his outspoken views against contraception and homosexuality. Now, it would seem he has gone way over the line by presenting a movie that his critics claim will incite anti-Semitism for implying that Jews were somehow responsible for the death of Jesus.

Against all this adversity, which even includes death threats, Mel Gibson stands firm. He has declared that he is remaining true to the Gospels. If his critics find fault with the content of the movie, then they would find even greater fault with that which is contained within Holy Scripture. However, this opens up yet another front against him, and that is a bevy of contemporary Scripture scholars who, through their intellectual gymnastics, want to provide a modern reading of the Gospels that would be palatable for everyone and offensive to no one. Even an ad hoc panel of scholars masquerading under the authority of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops contacted Gibson's Icon Productions to voice their disapproval of his film, causing the embarrassed USCCB to distance itself from the scholars and to issue a quick apology.

In the final analysis, it is in the viewing of the finished picture that proper criticism can be made. As is common in Hollywood, the screenplay goes through constant metamorphoses, up to and

through the filming itself. Even after that, the editing process continues to make the story change. It was not until I saw the nearly finished version of the film at a special screening provided by Icon Productions for priests and religious of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles on the Friday before Gaudete Sunday that I came to realize that this movie wasn't really an account of Christ's Passion based primarily on the visions of two mystic nuns. Rather, this was an interpretation of the event as found in Scripture. The mystical interpretations only occasionally flavor the story and would not even be noticeable by those unfamiliar with Anne Catherine Emmerich or Mary of Agreda.

One of the most powerful scenes in the film occurs at the very beginning. The Garden of Gethsemane is pictured as a dark and brooding place, filled with that same haunting fog that has come to characterize the classic horror movies of the 1930s. In the garden the figure of Jesus is seen standing and kneeling in anguish, praying in Aramaic to His Father. (Gibson's well-publicized desire to film the entire movie in Aramaic, Hebrew, and Latin was accomplished, but not without the inclusion of subtitles. The subtitles are not always necessary in the more familiar portions of the story, but aid the audience's cognition whenever the dialogue becomes extensive.) Gibson brings the Devil into the garden to help increase Christ's torment and tie the scene, thematically, to the Garden of Eden. An actress fills the role of the Devil with a shaved head and the superimposed voice of a man. She becomes an anti-Madonna and a malevolent counterweight to the Blessed Mother who is reverently portrayed throughout the movie. With a creepy androgyny and panther-like movements, this Devil torments Christ by calling into doubt the need for His redemptive suffering. The Devil sends a slithering snake into the garden. But just before it is able to inflict harm, Christ rises suddenly and with a quick step crushes its skull.

From that scene onward, it is clear that this is going to be a combat between the forces of good and evil. That archetypal fight between good and evil is the stuff of which cinematic tales are made. And this movie, like every other film, needs its heroes and villains. In Catholic art and theater, Caiaphas, Judas, and Pilate act as the principal agents through which the death of Jesus is accomplished. Gibson's film is no exception. Judas betrays his Master and then relents. But his change of heart comes too late. Children with demonic faces (a mystical elaboration) chide the Apostle into hanging himself. Pilate, on the other hand, is presented as a weak and vacillating Roman Procurator. His paramount interest is in suppressing rebellion. While his wife, Claudia, has cautionary premonitions against sending Jesus to His death, Pilate ultimately ignores her as he plays a political game of strategy with the High Priest Caiaphas, and loses.

The real villain of the piece is Caiaphas and those priests of the Sanhedrin who fear Jesus and agitate for His crucifixion. Herein lies the source for the charges leveled against the film for its alleged anti-Semitism. In 1916, when D.W. Griffith was filming the Passion of Christ as part of his silent movie *Intolerance*, he originally shot the nailing of Christ to the cross with the Jews instead of the Romans wielding the hammers. Understandably, the Anti-Defamation League protested, and Griffith was forced to burn the offending footage before them in order to make amends. In Gibson's film, the Roman soldiers are portrayed as a brutal and bloodthirsty police force who are responsible for the torture and execution of Jesus. There are a few good Romans (like Pilate's sympathetic wife who gives Mary some linens with which to sop up her Son's blood left at the scourging pillar). So too with the Jews portrayed in Gibson's film. Some are good and some are bad, some are heroes and some are villains. The desire of Caiaphas to have Jesus

executed is evident from the beginning of the film. And yet it would seem that by portraying Caiaphas and the majority (but not all!) of the Sanhedrin in this adversarial role, certain Jewish and Christian groups are crying foul, implying that Gibson is a bigot and his film will spark anti-Jewish hatred.

As a consequence of the furor that has been stirred up, the whole question of what it means to be anti-Semitic comes up for debate. If anti-Semitism is a label that can be applied to anyone who dares to think that Jews too can embrace evil, then Gibson is an unabashed anti-Semite. But so would be the Evangelist John, and all the Old Testament prophets! Why was such an epithet not leveled at Andrew Lloyd Weber when his Caiaphas appeared in *Jesus Christ Superstar*? That figure is much more stereotypically wicked than Gibson's rather colorless high priest. It may be because Gibson identifies himself as a Catholic, and in the present-day culture wars, baiting Catholics has become a recreational sport. In fact, it has become an all too frequent custom of late to transform Caiaphas and his Sanhedrin into mocking stereotypes of the papal curia. In the latest Broadway production of *Superstar*, Caiaphas and his evil priests wear Roman cassocks. In the Oberammergau Passion Play of 2000, Caiaphas entered the stage while being carried in a sedia gestatoria. For fear of being labeled anti-Semitic, artists have embraced with relish an unfettered anti-Catholicism.

In contrast to his villainous Caiaphas, Gibson makes a deliberate effort to showcase good and noble Jews throughout his film, and these are the supporting roles which are most beautifully articulated: Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalen, Veronica, Simon of Cyrene, and the Apostle John. Critics so far have ignored this aspect of Gibson's *Passion*, and yet it is perhaps one of the most innovative Catholic features of the movie. These figures are more than decorative, they have a critical role to play in witnessing to Jesus. In the Catholic Church they have long been venerated as saints. With regard to the violence that exists in the film, Gibson defends himself by reminding us that crucifixion is not pretty. It was Martin Scorsese who first realistically portrayed the true hideousness of that kind of Roman execution in *The Last Temptation of Christ*. But Scorsese's Jesus was a mixed-up Messiah, doubting his own mission. The audience did not sob during the flagellation and crucifixion scenes in that film as it did in the test audiences viewing *Passion*. Gibson's Christ is the Paschal Victim and the Bread of Life, and the director amplifies this distinctly Catholic viewpoint in his film. For instance, in a flashback, the Apostles are shown taking freshly baked Passover bread from the oven to the table of the Last Supper. Wrapped in a cloth and placed on the table, the bread is then uncovered just as the scene abruptly changes to Christ on Golgotha being stripped of his garments. In another flashback the consecrated bread of the Last Supper is being elevated when a quick cut occurs showing the Cross of Christ being raised. This is Catholic cinema at its best, without apology, without compromise.

As for Jim Caviezel, he suffered much in playing the role of Jesus. He had to endure endless days of hypothermia as his body bucked the bitter cold winds that whipped around the vertical cross. The daily make-up process took hours, from 2 A.M. to 10 A.M. His face was reconstructed to look Semitic,

and the finished product looks not unlike the figure found in the Shroud of Turin. Caviezel suffered the effects of the scourging at the pillar when the actors playing Roman soldiers missed their mark twice causing the lash to actually cut into his bare back. Carrying the heavy cross caused the actor's shoulder to dislocate. And, in the strangest incident of all, while filming a scene of the Sermon on the Mount (cut from the version I viewed), the actor was actually hit by a bolt of lightning. Seeing all this with the eyes of faith, Caviezel accepts his hardships now as part of the spiritual process of an ongoing conversion. Even the bizarre lightning incident seems to him a kind of miracle. Not only did he survive, but witnesses told him that his entire body glowed and two balls of fire appeared on either side of him, as if it were a scene of the Transfiguration.

Both Gibson and Caviezel believe in miracles, in signs and signal graces. Mass and Confession were consistently offered throughout the production of the film. Like men on a mission, they sought to fortify themselves and make the Gospel story come alive, and without compromise. They reject the Christ who has been demythologized by modern exegetes, the sterile Savior of the Jesus Seminar, the politically correct Jesus who is not a wonder worker. There is a Jesus of that old-time religion, a Savior who redeemed a sinful world, a Christ for whom martyrs have been made. Thus, it is not surprising that in the homogenized world of contemporary political and religious thought, a film like this might strike some intellectuals and cultural pacesetters as dangerously paleo-Christian.

As industry opposition intensifies. The Passion of the Christ has had a hard time getting marketed. For many months the major distributors in Hollywood turned away from Gibson's project, acting as if they knew him not. Mer the Los Angeles preview I attended, the marketing manager, Paul Lauer, spoke to the clerics and religious asking for their help, to spread the good word about this film and urge their constituencies to see it. As I write (in mid-December), an outreach is being set up ([thepassionoutreach.com](http://thepassionoutreach.com)), free posters and flyers are being distributed ([passionmaterials.com](http://passionmaterials.com)), advance tickets are being sold ([thepassiontickets.com](http://thepassiontickets.com)) in an effort to create what the Daily Variety used to call a "sure seater." That is a film that would have an overwhelming appeal to a certain segment of society (such as Christians) and thus in sure its financial success despite the lack of industry backing. Protestants have successfully used this method time and again, whether marketing films on Martin Luther in the past or pushing the apocalyptic Left Behind series in the present. If "Braveheart" himself could pull off such a coup in the face of overwhelming opposition, then it is certain to shake up a motion picture industry that has become increasingly filled with anti-Christian biases. In the meantime, one thing is sure: Mel Gibson has a glorious cross to carry, but the walk up Calvary is proving itself to be both rough and steep.