

April 15, 2004

The Passion: A GUIDE TO THE PASSION

NOTES ON THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST SYMBOLISM These are personal notes from a group discussion with a priest called Fr. Sean of the Legionaries of Christ. The discussion took place on Friday, February 27, 2004 at the St. Joseph Center in Alabama. Fr. Sean said he has seen the movie 6 times and that his order had a priest on the set every day that Mel Gibson was shooting the movie. Because of this, he was privy to much information about the symbolism throughout the picture. Please forgive me if the notes seem to ramble. They are merely a guide to ideas brought up in discussion that night and are by no means a comprehensive list.

1. What was the meaning of the evil baby that Satan was holding?
That image of Satan holding an ugly child is an anti-Madonna image. The child represents the future persecutions of the body of Christ, the Church. The child is ugly because evil is a deformation of good. The child is stroking the face of Satan because evil perverts what is good. The stroking symbolizes the love of evil, much like a child would love its mother, but in a perverted way. Remember this image happens when Jesus is being scourged. His body is being wounded. His body is being persecuted. It is an image used by Mel Gibson to show Satan flaunting his future plan of persecution of the Church in the face of the sacrifice of the Lord.
2. Why is this movie so violent?
The violence you see Jim Caviezel endure as Jesus is really a reflection of the violence that sin does to our souls. Violence is the effect of sin on our souls. It destroys and disfigures us. It maims us. It makes us look inhuman, ugly and hideous before the Father. The violence also represents the price of our redemption. Since Jesus took on our sin, He was made sin for us according to St. Paul, He took on the punishment of that sin. ! For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him. (2 Corinthians 5:21) This is the purpose of the violence in the film, to get people to realize the price that is paid by the body of Christ when people commit sin and the price paid by the Savior to set us free.
3. There was a discussion about the Agony in the Garden scene.
Fr. Sean brought up the idea that the reason Jesus suffered in the Garden was because that is the moment He took on sin for us. St. Paul says that God the Father made Jesus to be sin. This is the moment when it Happens in the Garden. Since Jesus is the Son of God and God is pure love, taking on the sin of the world, yours and mine, the sin of a Hitler, a Stalin, a Genghis Kahn, etc., was an excruciating experience for Him. At that moment, pure Love was forced to coexist with the evil effect of sin in the agony Jesus experienced in the Garden of Gethsemane.
4. In the Garden of Gethsemane, what is the snake a reference to? Genesis 3:15 "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel. Notice that Jesus suffers immensely while Satan adds to His burden but then Jesus makes a decision to do the will and with that

resolve he stomps on the snake to kill it.

5. There are plenty of Mass references in this picture. When Jesus is being stripped, the movie flashes back to the Last Supper when the bread is brought to the table and uncovered. When Jesus is being elevated on the cross after being nailed to it, we see a flashback to the Last Supper when Jesus raises the bread and says, This is my body. The apostle John is shown as the one who remembers these flashbacks and who makes the connection between the Bread of Life on the cross and the Breaking of the Bread at the Last Supper.

6. When is the first time we see Mary?
Just as Jesus is arrested and put into chains. She wakes up saying, "Why is this night different than any other?" And Mary Magdalene responds that this is the night that they were set free from slavery. Where do these lines come from? They are the words that the youngest says to the oldest at a Jewish Passover/Seder supper ritual. In this case, the oldest was saying them to the youngest because this was THE night that would set in motion the plan of salvation to set us free from sin.

The new Passover had begun with Jesus as the Lamb. Maia Morgenstern, A Jewess herself, had the idea to use these lines in the scene and when she explained them to Mel, he agreed they had to be included in the picture to tie everything together.

7. When is the first time we see a maggot?
8. In the Garden of Gethsemane when you see one crawling in and out of the nostril of Satan. It is a very quick scene. When do we see a maggot again? When Judas finds himself sitting next to a maggot infested mule. The maggot represents death and corruption.
9. In this picture Pontius Pilate was portrayed sympathetically. Why so? Mel Gibson wanted him to represent the struggle of every man when faced with moral choices. It was obvious to Pilate that Jesus was an innocent man. It was obvious to Pilate that Barabbas was corrupt. (It was no accident that his makeup made Barabbas look even more evil and deranged.)

To Pilate the right choice was obvious but he did not make it because of his own fears and the pressure from an unruly crowd he wanted to appease.

Mel's message was that every time we choose sin, the choice is always obvious like the choice between Barabbas and Jesus. Of course there are times when the temptation that approaches us is very beautiful in appearance, but down deep inside, we know what the choice should be and very often we do exactly what Pilate did and afterwards try to wash our hands to relieve our guilt.

10. Why was there a scene when Jesus falls over the bridge only to find Judas at the bottom? Judas has just denied Jesus in the Garden. At this moment, Judas represents every man who when faced with the truth denies it. In this scene, he represents every man who runs

away from the truth and Mel Gibson wanted to remind the audience that you cannot run away and hide from the truth because the truth will always find you. In this case, Jesus has been arrested, is beaten and falls from the bridge while hanging in chains right in front of Judas. The Truth found Judas even though he had denied Him and tried to hide from Him.

11. Notice that in the picture whenever Satan is shown, he is always in the background moving behind the scenes. Notice he is always in the background whenever there is intensity and anger in the foreground directed towards Jesus. This is symbolic of his actions motivating the aggression and intensity of persecution against the Body of Christ, the Church, and also is symbolic of his responsibility behind all evil motivations.
12. When Jesus is before Pilate, He notices a dove in the sky above Him. It represents a reminder of the vertical dimension, the relationship between man and God. We as human beings are often caught up in the horizontal dimension (relationships with men and worldly affairs) and forget there is a vertical dimension. The vertical dimension represents the spiritual life, the relationship of a soul with the Father. The vertical dimension is what is more important and the dove is a reminder to Jesus that the vertical dimension is in control despite the appearance of the situation.
13. Why do Mary and Mary Magdalene clean up the blood on the cobble stones after Jesus is scourged? It is because it is Jewish tradition to save the blood. Life is in the blood. Blood had to be collected. This is also representative of the cleaning of the vessels at Mass when a priest is done with the consecration and giving out the Eucharist. The blood was precious and Jesus' blood particularly is precious. Notice that they also collected the instruments that made Him bleed at the very end of the film when you see the crown of thorns, the nails and the hammer at the foot of the cross as they take down the body of Jesus.
14. There is a scene at the crucifixion where Mary Magdalene is the only one who sees a miracle happen. It is a very quick scene and it happens when she is on her knees (notice that the only ones on their knees are Mary, John and the Magdalene at the crucifixion). Jesus has been nailed to the cross and the Romans are turning it over. You expect Jesus to smash His face into the ground when the cross falls over but it does not happen. Instead what you see is Magdalene looking up to see that the cross is floating above the ground. She is the only one to see that Jesus is floating a few inches above the ground the entire time that they are hammering the nails on the back of the cross to secure them. It is a representation of God still in control of the whole crucifixion process.
15. Every time that Jesus meets His mother Mary along His Passion He is strengthened and has new resolve. This is especially noticeable after Jesus is scourged the first time. The Romans have beat him over 70 times and He has collapsed. He sees Mary and finds the strength to stand up much to the dismay and surprise of the Roman soldiers who then decide to use a more vicious whip with metal tips. This scene represents the idea that Mary is living proof to Jesus that the sacrifice He is about to make for mankind is not in vain. The film shows that Jesus comes to a decision to continue on the path to Calvary

each time they look at each other. Some say it reinforces the idea of Mary as co-redemptrix.

16. Simon of Cyrene represents every man who is faced with the cross and does not want to carry it. He also represents those who do not want to help others carry their crosses. Yet, in this film he also represents the person who is forced to carry the cross and then becomes so engaged with Christ that he wants a deeper relationship with Him. The arms of Jesus and Simon the Cyrene are intertwined as they carry the cross together and that image represents the efforts of each soul carrying its cross with the help of the Savior. That final look that Simon gives Jesus after he has finished helping Him, represents the longing of every soul to have a deeper relationship with the Lord after coming face to face with Him. It was through carrying the cross that Simon came to have a desire to have an intimate relationship with Jesus much like that of the soul who longs to know Christ better in the midst of suffering.
17. Notice in the Garden of Gethsemane scene when Judas denies Jesus that the Lord never takes His eyes off of him when he denies Him. The Lord never takes His eyes off of Judas even when Judas runs away. That is representative of the Lord's own relationship with us. Jesus never takes His eyes off of us when we deny Him or turn away from Him.