

The Passion Behind "The Passion Of The Christ"

From The FAITH Magazine July-August 2004

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The Scandal Of The Cross

"To the Jews a scandal, to the Greeks foolishness, but to those called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (I Cor. 1:23f.) So St. Paul described the reactions of hearers to his preaching of Christ crucified. Mel Gibson's film "The Passion of the Christ" has called forth the same reactions in our day. Many who had not even seen the film were already condemning or praising it. Now that it has appeared in theaters it seems that the strong reactions were justified: strong meat to strong tastes. The film is powerful, full of dramatic intensity and trenchant images, as it moves quickly from one event to another in the last earthly day of Jesus of Nazareth. Peter's triple denial of Jesus, which a sedate reading of the gospel would imagine as occurring over some time (cf. Mk. 15:66-72; Jn. 18:15-27), is portrayed as taking place within a couple of minutes as the harried, fearful Galilean fisherman is jostled by the crowd and thrown into flight. Judas' suicide likewise occurs with rapidity after the director's imagination, stirred by the visions of Anna Katherina Emmerich, introduces a final encounter with Jesus the prisoner on the way to trial. The director does not spare the sensitivities of those squeamish before the sight of blood. Astute camera work never lets the audience escape the confrontational drama into which it is pulled. Though there are flashbacks into Jesus' earlier life, the very peacefulness of those scenes only heightens the shock of the tragedy which the captive audience is compelled to observe. Aristotle might have applauded the unity of time and action, but he probably would have faulted the lack of a turning point and the brief ending when through the intimation of resurrection the "tragedy" turns from misery to joy instead of from happiness to misery. But this is not a Greek drama, rather it is the way of the Son of God for the redemption of mankind, a redemption decreed by the Father before all ages that evolves with the necessity of divine self-giving. Though all know how everything must turn out, the force of divine logic overwhelms. Why did it have to be thus? After a reflection on Jesus and His mission, the reason for the reactions of various groups can be better understood.

The Challenge of Jesus

The film renders the viewers uncomfortable, as it should. Jesus did not enter a fallen world to reaffirm its faith in itself. He did not preach the American civil religion in which a vague, distant God asks for tolerance and assures all men of good will that they are alright as long as they are sincere. Tolerance is a virtue invented in the Enlightenment and adopted by capitalism to remove obstacles to

the free movement of trade. Mel Gibson's Jesus does not demand tolerance. He wants to make all things new by suffering. Much more demanding than tolerance, love requires self-sacrifice even unto the end, a giving up of the world with all its commodious exchange. As I returned from the film with some silent, pensive seminarians, the car radio, which had been left on, started to chant soft words about love. One of them turned it off to the remark that such love is not the real thing. Not much communality could be found between love-sick crooners and the Jesus portrayed on the screen that night. Love is demanding and it destroys the parameters of mere tolerance and good feelings. Unlike Adam Smith, love does not channel nor moderate selfishness; love crucifies it.

The widely divergent opinions about the film are not primarily reducible to disagreement in aesthetic judgments. Art is subjective insofar as it appeals to personal sensitivity. But the debate about "The Passion" touches mysteries deeper than aesthetics. What is the meaning of Jesus' life? The audience is faced with the dilemma that confronted Jesus' first audiences when He spoke in parables. Jesus explained to His disciples His reason for teaching in parables: "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but to those outside all is in parables in order that 'looking they might look and not see, and hearing they might hear and not understand, lest they should turn and it would be forgiven them.'" (Mk. 4:11f.) That reason seems at first most odd: He teaches in order not to be understood. Many exegetes have battered their heads against that saying and evolved weird hypotheses to explain it. But its citation of Isaiah 6:9f. not only aligns Jesus with Jewish prophetic tradition but also indicates God's way of working with human freedom. Signs are given of God's workings, and all signs, being finite and distinct from what they signify, can be interpreted in multifarious ways. The kingdom of God is a mystery, for it indicates primarily not an institution nor a plan of action nor a human fantasy where justice and peace somehow coincide, but where God concretely rules. God's rule of course is realized in Jesus, who does not His own will but the Father's (Mk. 14:36), and in all those who follow Jesus and share His life on His way to the cross (1:14-20; 3:34f.).

Jesus as Parable

Some exegetes perceptively noted that Jesus' parables are usually not mere illustrations of universal moral precepts but startling claims for adherence and faith wrapped in stories from daily life. The sower follows the normal Palestinian practice of sowing before plowing, but where in this world does sowing bring a yield of thirty-fold, sixty-fold, and a hundred-fold (Mk. 4:1-9)? How long would a shepherd survive economically who regularly abandons ninety-nine percent of his flock in the wilderness, where bears, wolves, and thieves abound, in the hope of corralling a wandering one percent (Lk. 15:3-7)? What father, after being wished dead by a selfish, wastrel son, would watch for that son, run to him from afar, cut short his apology to celebrate his return, and restore him to filial honor (Lk. 15:11-32)? What king would invite beggars to his son's marriage feast (Lk. 14:16-24) or forgive a debt of ten thousand talents, the rough equivalent of five

or six billion dollars today[1] (Mt. 18:27)? What proprietor, after the maltreatment and murder of his servants, would send his only son to rebellious tenants in the hope of winning their respect (Mk. 12:1-12)? Not in this world is such behavior the norm. In accepting Jesus' parables one has to see reality with new eyes, the eyes of divine love. One has to entrust oneself to Jesus and His way in faith.[2]

On that way of faith Jesus gave signs of what was to come, but men did not perceive them, not even the disciples. His miracles revealed a power stronger than Satan and mortality. He spoke of His death in terms of a baptism, a chalice, the removal of a bridegroom (Mk. 2: 19f.; 10:38 -40; Lk. 12:50). None of those hints sufficed to open the eyes of men convinced that they were soon to share in Messianic glory. When Jesus spoke of the Son of Man's sufferings, death, and resurrection, not even then did the disciples comprehend. For the Son of Man was a glorious ruler who was to come on the clouds of heaven to judge the world (Dan. 7:13f.). There was no trace in tradition of him living on this earth and dying. How then was he to rise from the dead (Mk. 9:9-13)? No wonder that Peter reproached Jesus, wishing to disabuse Him of His error (Mk. 8:32). Jesus even seemed to distinguish Himself from the future glorious judge, that Son of Man (Mk. 8:38). How then were the disciples expected to recognize Jesus, the confessed Messiah, as the Son of Man doomed to death? They met every Passion prediction with incomprehension and after Jesus' harsh rebuke of Peter's correction (Mk. 8:33), they dared not pose another question (Mk. 9:10.32; 10:33 -45). So they were overwhelmed by the cross and utterly surprised by the resurrection. Only at Easter did the scales fall from their eyes and they recognized that Jesus had been talking about Himself as the Son of Man. The signs had been seen and heard but had not been perceived by His disciples before the grace of Easter. Love is perceived only by those who understand love, those to whom the gift is given.[3]

Divine Omnipotence and Wrath

Of course the greatest sign was Jesus' Passion to which everything else in His life was prelude. There the meaning of divine love was revealed in the sight of all as "the Lord of glory" was raised on the cross (I Cor. 2:8). In utter weakness Jesus manifested the power of divine love that wished to go so far in bearing men's sins. For the cross becomes the place of judgment. Human beings either accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior, God's final revelation to the world, or they refuse the salvation offered. Accepting Jesus involves demolishing the hardness of one's heart and living for a crucified Savior, ready to follow Him to death. In that decision, which Jesus' pierced heart effects, is revealed divine omnipotence. For the believer is sacrificing everything which this world offers, past, present, and future, to be with Jesus, ready to die for Him. Thus the world with all its glamour has been relativized by the love of a crucified God. The power and majesty of the world counts as nothing in the balance in comparison with the

love of God from whom the believer knows he cannot be separated (Rom. 8:31-39). That is the love by which Christ has overcome the world (Jn. 16:33).

If one refuses the testimony of the cross, God's wrath follows inevitably. Divine wrath must not be imagined as the expression of a petulant Zeus or Hera whose whim has been crossed by mere mortals. God is love from all eternity and is immutably so. God's wrath is but hardened sinners' experience of God's love. Their rejection of love must harden their hearts. The greater and more manifest the appeal of God's love, the thicker and more impenetrable must become the callouses they grow on their conscience to ward off love's power. For sinners do not want to lose themselves to love. They want to be autonomous, deciding for themselves what is good and evil (Gen. 3:5f.22). They do not wish to glorify and thank God (Rom. 1:21), even though such a life, which receives all as gift, would be their greatest joy. God's punishment then is to let man have his own way, to give rein to his "freedom." He hands him over to his own passions and since the sinner prefers "the likeness of the image of a corruptible man" to the "glory of the incorruptible God," man finds himself contradicting his own nature and doomed to death (Rom. 1:22-32). Created in the image and likeness of the God who is infinite Love, man by refusing love isolates himself, contradicts himself, and relies upon himself, a very mortal deity, to survive. Where God's love would have led man beyond himself in self-sacrifice to limitless love, sinful man has closed himself off in his sin and must face death as his destruction, robbing him of the "freedom" which he prized above God.[4]

Redeeming Love

Fortunately God's love does not consign all men to final condemnation. He seeks to win back man's heart. Since the wonders of creation no longer suffice to lead men to God in a world rendered ambiguous by sin, the Father made His own Son, who did not know sin, sin in order that sinners may become God's justice in Him (II Cor. 5:17-21). Although this Pauline text has been used to bolster a penal substitution theory of redemption whereby God takes out His wrathful justice upon a sinless Son so that sinful man might escape condemnation, such a view does honor neither to God's justice nor to His love. God's justice is justifying (Rom. 3:26 ; 4:5), turning the sinner into a saint by the interior conversion of love which His Son effects on the cross. As the divine Son, Jesus cannot sin, but He became sin insofar as by assuming a human nature He entered into the play of sinful human freedoms. The Father treated the Son as He treated sinners into whose midst He placed His Son. He was handed over to sinful passions. The more clearly Jesus revealed divine love, the more bitter became the resistance to Him. For in giving all God has to demand all in return. Were He to demand less than total dedication in response, He could not give Himself to men as He wishes. Even the best of men, the pious Jews who sought to preserve God's Law and people, refused to imagine a love more generous, more magnanimous, more demanding than the Law. They preferred the finite Law, a sign of God's love, to the infinite God of love. It seems foolishness to follow any man to death unless one sees the infinite love that He incorporates, and that is a gift given only to

those who are willing to confess their sins and follow Jesus, surrendering all for His sake (Mk. 1:14f.; 8:34-38; 10:27-31). Jesus is the parable of God -- theologians might call Him the living analogy of God -- in a sinful world so that men might recognize the mystery of love and make it their own. Such being the choice offered to the Jews and to all men, the Father respects human freedom even to the extent that it effects His Son's death. What more can the Father do to persuade the rebellious hearts of the tenants of Israel (Mk. 12:1-12)? In Jesus are united love of God and love of neighbor (Mk. 12:28 -34), and the refusal of Him leads to the destruction of the temple, the anticipation of the world's final condemnation insofar as it rejects Christ (Mk. 13).

The Mystery of Death, Suffering, and Evil

Jesus' death becomes the point of decision. In modernity Heidegger understands man as "being unto death," for only in death does the meaning of one's life become clear. Before that moment no final judgment about the meaning of one's existence is possible; hence the professor from the Black Forest demands a reverent hush before the mystery of existence. Such agnosticism is well tailored to a modern academic whose own foray into politics so erroneously supported Naziism. Ignorance serves as an excuse, and lack of full commitment might prolong one's life in this world. But most human beings do not enjoy endowed chairs and recognize that they have to make vital decisions for which they are forever responsible. They need light before death. In antiquity a greater philosopher found light in Socrates' death. Plato saw that good man, in obedience to the god, for love of ungrateful fellow citizens, and submissive to the laws of Athens, drink hemlock while assuring his disciples of a life surpassing death. Socrates preferred to suffer evil rather than do it and died for justice. Philosophic calm persuades partially, but Plato sensed a deeper mystery. In the Republic II (360d-368b) Glaucon and Adeimantos proposed the contrast of a just man, who is reputed unjust, condemned to the most outrageous torments, and finally impaled, with an unjust man, who is reputed just while leading a most successful life, and then asked Socrates to prove the superiority of justice over injustice. Faced with such a stark alternative in which nothing mitigated the harshness of the choice Socrates shifted ground and began to consider justice in terms of the city-state. Perhaps he realized that no reason for justice's superiority can be alleged from human experience in dealing with the fate of individuals. The Scholastics would later say, *individuum est ineffabile*, or, no reason can be given for an individual case. Yet all men are individual cases and all choices are individual.

Human reason can never explain injustice. Insofar as an explanation involves a cause, which in turn implies a necessary link between cause and effect, any explanation of injustice would render it necessary, hence not free and not unjust. Moreover human experience falls short of answers in the face of "death, that undiscovered land, from whose bourn no traveler returns." Hamlet did not need his German education to inform him of that mystery, but, like Heidegger, he knew the Angst that death can cause, as it "puzzles the will" and sicklies "the nature hue of resolution" for "enterprises of great pith and moment." What then

does Jesus' death say of the meaning of human life? Men must give an answer. For it really happened. What is the meaning of a life which was lived entirely for God and other men and yet suffered such unjust agony, rejection, abandonment, betrayal, and death? Is justice real? Or is it an imaginary construction which weak humans employ to establish a bit of order in social life so that we might enjoy our commodities before death devours us all?

Jesus' passion and death, portrayed in unremitting brutality by Mel Gibson, forces the basic question of life upon all who see it. Death is not beautified in a funeral parlor nor is injustice something to be adjusted in a courthouse. What is the sense of innocent, unjust suffering? Countless human beings have been pitilessly masticated in the jaw of history, whose injustice we mitigate or forget. We survive and prefer not to contemplate our impotence. But Jesus brings up the question to us again and again. One sees then why the passions of reviewers have been roused so strongly by Gibson's film. It forces them to face reality and take a position. Jews, secularists, liberal Christians, evangelicals, and Catholics all see something different and react.

The Jewish Reaction

Faced with the horror of the crucifixion, many Jews see themselves blamed for deicide and, reacting to centuries of persecution, raise the charge of anti-Semitism. In the depiction of Pilate they espy a more lenient treatment of Roman culpability. For Pilate is struggling with the question of many "truths," as if he were a modern intellectual. Yet to a Christian anti-Semitism is in no way insinuated, much less stated by the film. The director clearly distanced himself from the charge. He confessed that he and every other Christian are responsible for the death of God's Son. That is Christian doctrine. Probably the earliest creed opens with the confession, "He died for our sins according to the Scriptures." (I Cor. 15:3) A Christian viewer must be fully aware of that because not only do flashbacks into Christ's earthly life emphasize His freedom in laying down His life and His love of enemies who hate Him, but also, in an editorial interpolation, at the moment when Mary approaches her fallen Son to offer comfort, Christ turns to her and says, "See, mother, I make all things new." (Cf. Apoc. 21:5) In many ways the Jews fare much better than the Romans. Not only are Jesus and His followers Jews, but also many in the crowd along the via crucis show Him pity, like Veronica; Simon of Cyrene, publicly scorned as "Jew" by a soldier, defends Him against the Romans, and two members of the Sanhedrin protest the illegality of the proceedings. These instances are not mentioned in the New Testament but portray Jews sympathetically. Certainly the high priests insist on Jesus' death and follow Him to Golgatha, but that is in accord with the Christian Scripture. If anything, they are more honorable than the Romans. For they at least are

reacting to a perceived blasphemy and against one who threatens the temple and the people's welfare. In fact the high priest dismisses all contradictory charges and condemns Jesus only after He utters the "blasphemy." At one point in the scourging the priests turn away, unwilling to approve such excess. Under the cross, Caiaphas' final comments, which Scripture describes as mockery, are not delivered in a ranting tone. Rather they can be understood as the final request, however skeptical, for proof of Jesus' Messiahship: if He would only come down and let them believe! Then over Caiaphas and the other Sanhedrin members Jesus prays from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Gibson emphasizes this forgiveness because just previously he had Jesus enunciate the same prayer over the Romans crucifying Him. This first usage corresponds better to Lk. 23:34, but Gibson is not wrong in applying it also to the Jews (cf. Acts 7:60), so great is Christ's love.

By comparison the Romans come off as brutes, especially in the long scourging scene as the soldiers goad each other on to a frenzy of ferocity. For all the modern intellectual that he is, Pilate is the most despicable personage. Warned by his wife, conscious of the insufficiency of evidence, confronted by the truth of Jesus, and sensitive to Jesus' torture, he yields to the high priests' political craftiness and the crowd's pressure again and again, handing Jesus over to scourging and then to death. The subjective multiplicity of truths to which he appeals reduces in the end to his own "truth," the political truth that Caesar will have his blood if another Jewish insurrection occurs. Knowing truth and justice, he surrenders to political expediency and his own advantage. The washing of his hands is the supreme act of cowardice. If moderns find him more sympathetic than the high priests who acted out of conviction, that says more about the condition of modernity than about Gibson's alleged anti-Semitism.

Yet it is hard for Jews to adopt a Christian standpoint. Their Scriptures do not tell them to love their enemies. The Mosaic Law rather prescribes, "Life for life, eyes for eye, tooth for tooth." (Ex. 21:23f.; Dt. 19:21; Lev. 24:20) However benevolently Christians may interpret this *jus talionis* as a restriction on unlimited vengeance and thus as progress toward the plenitude of New Testament revelation, Jews do not accept the New Testament, and their Law says what it says. Does not the *jus talionis* express the fundamental rule of justice, tit-for-tat, the appropriate punishment for evil-doing? If a beloved Jewish leader were killed, would not Jews be justly wrought at his killer and expect retribution? Jews acknowledge the "virtue of hatred" as the morally obligatory reaction to the "frightfully wicked" who have surpassed all bounds of human decency and placed themselves outside human brotherhood.[5] How can they not imagine that Christians must hate them for having killed their God? Certainly the behavior of Christians over the centuries has not convinced Jews of unlimited benevolence, and Jews cultivate the memory of wrongs done to them as a means of maintaining religious and national solidarity. For Jews to see the cross of Jesus as a blessing and a sign of love goes contrary to their whole approach to life. God's Law promises abundant earthly rewards to those who do His will and

horrific punishment to those flout His commands (Dt. 28-30). How can Jesus, crucified and despised, be a blessing and a sign of God's love? "A hanged man is accursed by God." (Dt. 21:23) If a Jew were to recognize God's mercy and forgiveness in Jesus' cross, he would have become a Christian. The cross remains a scandal to the Jews.

Secularist Incomprehension

Secularist critics have played their own game with the Gibson film, mocking its use of Aramaic and Latin, censuring the alleged lack of nuance in the acting, horrified at the spilling of blood. How strange that those who are usually the first to man the ideological barricades in defense of artistic freedom when charges of gratuitous violence are raised against films now discover a delicate sensitivity and become fastidious at the sight of blood. Yet not so strange, for the portrayal of such suffering as Jesus undergoes, which in no ways panders to human cruelty or sadomasochism, must render them most uncomfortable. The Achilles heel of all secularist ideologies is their utter inability to explain suffering and death. Precisely because they cannot justify pain, they employ all sorts of devices to banish it from the world. Suffering is deemed intolerable and in the name of its abolition divorce, contraception, free drug use, abortion, suicide, and euthanasia are promoted as liberations. Unfortunately the faster one flies from pain, the more closely does pain pursue its fleeing foe, sure of victory. Indeed secularists close the circle on their own reasonings because their frequently cited argument for rejecting belief in God is the guilt for all human suffering which they ascribe to His omniscient omnipotence. Rejecting the Absolute, they prefer the absurdity of infinite points of view to the mystery that is God. Secularists seem to think that man is entitled to be beyond suffering, as if he were Feuerbach's imagined god, MAN without limitations Such is neither man nor God. More incredibly, moral evil is to be overcome by improved education and controlled social conditioning, as if education's aim were not increased freedom, which stands in opposition to the imposition of external conditioning. But in Jesus, as accurately presented in "The Passion," secularists are forced to face the reality of suffering, death, and moral evil, not as some accidents that fortuitously occur and can be sanitized in a hospital bed or quickly deposited in a funeral urn, but as the destiny that forces itself on every person living.

In Jesus' Passion the suffering that ends in death is not something to be fled as most men, subservient to their animal nature's instinctual quest of pleasure, flee it. The cup of suffering is freely accepted and drunk to the dregs. There must be something more than human which enables Jesus to realize such a sacrifice. It is certainly not the abstract love of humanity which pervades political platitudes and which, most people, thanks in good part to the practice of politicians, know, does not correspond to reality. The humanity at whose hands and for whom Jesus dies is anything but lovable in itself. It is most corrupt and sinful. The new creation, which Marxists and their liberal bedfellows imagine as the inevitable result of human progress, is only achieved in Christian faith by the goodness of a self-sacrificial God overcoming human depravity. Philosophical reasoning can never

explain the absurdity of sin, much less overcome in practice what it cannot understand. But to recognize its own incapacity and to turn to God as the only possible solution to the reality of evil is a conversion which the secular mind refuses to accomplish. That would be to surrender its most precious autonomy, acknowledge the foolishness of its wisdom, and change its selfish way of life.

Liberal Theologians

Liberal Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, have rejected Gibson's "Passion." Trotted out by the New York Times, they sympathize with the Jews for the film's alleged anti-Semitism, echo the artistic disparagement of secular critics, and complain that Gibson's emphasis upon suffering not only tears Jesus out of the context of His life and message but also ignores the significance of the resurrection. Hardly anything else could be expected of them. Having adapted, in a glorious *aggiornamento*, their faith to the modern world and its ideologies, they desperately try to enjoy the best of both worlds. Often their livelihood depends on some institutional connection to Christianity. Nothing will force them to acknowledge two stark alternatives, much less to choose between them. Jesus' message, freed from culturally conditioned archaisms, can be universalized as a benevolent and tolerant love for humanity that rejects all narrow legalism. Legalism, after all, requires a definite code of conduct with consequences. Much better to make a fundamental option for the good, not worry too much about the details, and trust one's good intentions to find the right solution to "hard cases." After all, individual conscience is supreme and ecclesial authoritarianism is to be resisted. Niebuhr's characterization of theological liberalism still retains its validity: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministries of Christ without a cross."^[6] The resurrection theology allows death and asceticism to be put aside so as to enjoy the good things of the world along with the rest of the bourgeoisie. So the professional exegetes, ensconced in well padded academic chairs, criticize Gibson's film as unhistorical, i.e., not in line with their own hypothetical deconstructions of the Gospels. But the historical-critical method founds a strange science in which all practitioners agree on method and come to widely divergent conclusions. No wonder most believers suspect the pretensions of such learning. Few things are so boring as a modern biblical commentary. Is there anyone alive who looks forward to an enjoyable evening curled up with a biblical commentary? Yet the Bible contains the word of life. A desiccated "science" that reduces Jesus' message to moral platitudes, accuses Him of various contradictions, and eviscerates Christianity of its challenge has emptied main-line Protestant Churches and sought to force a vapid catechesis and moral pluralism upon Catholics. But men seek truth and a God whom they can worship, a God who challenges them to be greater than themselves. Does it surprise anyone that fundamentalist and evangelical churches are burgeoning and that a new generation of Catholics is rejecting the "progressive wisdom" of university professors? The Jesus of the Gospels transcends the theologians and speaks to the hearts and heads of those who are ready to believe. It is ironic that in the age of the laity proclaimed by the learned clerks, when a layman like Gibson touches

millions with the truths of traditional Christianity, the clerks murmur their disapproval.

Evangelical Enthusiasm

It is easy to perceive why "The Passion of the Christ" has won rave notices from evangelical Christians. It takes seriously the New Testament accounts of Jesus' death. A clear choice is offered between Christ and Satan. Sin is a horror, if the Son of God has to undergo such sufferings for the redemption of the human race. Throughout His trials the devil assails Jesus with the temptation to give it all up. No man can bear the full burden of sin. Saving men's souls is too costly. The disfigured child whom for a moment Satan's arms cradle, in parody of the Virgin Mary and her child, represents fallen, perverted, sinful humanity that smiles at Jesus' scourging. That humanity is effecting Jesus' agony as Satan passes among the crowd. Is that humanity worth it? All the passions of men smite Jesus, and still He persists in His love for them. Contrary to His own will He chooses the Father's will and crushes the smooth serpent of rebellion. If ever an irrational love should exist, this is it. Jesus' love overthrows all the pretensions of a rationalized and rationalizing world. It comes from beyond such a world in which men try to make themselves masters. But if such a love is real, all the ordinary values of that world are overturned. And if Jesus' sufferings do not touch the hardened hearts of sinners, what can? Every viewer is invited to enter into a personal relation with his Savior and turn from his sin. All the flashbacks into Jesus' early life make Him so humanly accessible and invite the viewer to identify with Him. Jesus' gaze touches all the major characters and forces each to take a stance. If He makes a decision for us, should we not make a decision for Him?

Such themes are dear to the heart of every evangelical believer, and Gibson's movie plays up to them. Perhaps Gibson's own battle with the passions that mastered him during his acting career forced him to take seriously the struggle between God and Satan that pervades the universe and every human heart. When the power of evil over human hearts is so strong, only the love of an infinite God can conquer it. When man sees the infinite abyss of his own nothingness and the woeful insufficiency of his own power, then the gratuity of redemption must bring a psalm of praise to his lips. He sees the world differently. The blood that is so freely shed by the Son of God is the blood that bathes believers clean. Jewish protests effected the omission from the final script of the crowd's cry, "Let His blood be upon our heads and the heads of our children," (Mt. 27:25) because they saw in those words a curse. Yet the believing Christian sees in them a blessing. He wishes to be bathed in the blood of the true paschal Lamb. Gibson may be hinting at that truth in the moment when Jesus' side is pierced on the cross. The blood and water flowing out, long recognized as symbols of baptism and the Eucharist, fall upon a Roman soldier and apparently effect a transformation. God's grace alone can turn a tormentor into a believer. That is the miracle in which evangelicals believe.

A Catholic Perspective

If "The Passion" heightens the moment of evangelical decision for God, it is also a very Catholic film. Gibson's Catholic piety directs the selection of scenes and the movement of the camera. No Catholic can miss the reference to the traditional *via crucis* as Jesus falls three times, meets His mother, encounters the women of Jerusalem, and lets His face be dried by Veronica's veil. Catholic devotion borrows from Emmerich's visions when Mary, accepting linen cloths from Pilate's wife, on her knees soaks them with the sacred blood spilled at the scourging. Without doubt Marian devotion suffuses the film. After his denial of Jesus Peter turns in sorrow to Mary for forgiveness, addressing her as "mother." Moreover, it is through her eyes that the way of the cross is traced. As Satan pursues Jesus behind the crowd on one side, Mary counters his influence by passing through the crowd on the other side to comfort her Son. Her eyes, brimming with grief, communicate the meaning of the Passion to every mother's child in the audience. She accepts God's will from her first Amen to her kissing of the nailed feet of her crucified Son. She wishes to die with Him, but He entrusts her to John as "mother." Is not this dying with Jesus her baptism, her salvation won by her Son? She remains to the end under the cross, and at the end in the *Pietà* position, one arm cradling her Son, the other open-handed to God, her eyes reach out into the audience, arousing pity and piety, inviting all to share her maternal woe. The Mother of Sorrows takes our pain into her own as she upholds her Son. For she accepts without murmur, only with anguish, the way which her Son chose to renew the world. Her faith never wavers, her patience never gives way. Following her child, she is the perfect disciple.

The significance of the Eucharist as Jesus' sacrifice, one with the cross, is startlingly brought out through the flashbacks to the Last Supper. As Jesus is stripped of His garments, the unleavened bread is unwrapped. As the pole of the cross drops into the earth and raises Jesus' body on high, at table Jesus is elevating the bread in thanksgiving and offering His body to the disciples. As Jesus' blood flows from the cross, He passes the consecrated chalice at table. Without a word being said the sacrifice of the Last Supper and the sacrifice of the cross are identified. It is the same Jesus who is giving His all, His very self in symbol and reality, in bread and wine as well as in His humanity, for His friends. The same sacrifice is willingly given twice over in an unbloody as well as a bloody manner. One can almost hear in the background the dense prose of the Tridentine Council's decree commenting:

Our Lord and God, although He was about to offer Himself once and for all to God the Father on the altar of the cross, where His death occurs, to effect their redemption, nonetheless, because His priesthood was not to be abolished through death (Heb. 7:24.27), at the Last Supper, on the night on which He was handed over (I Cor. 11:13), in order to leave to the Church, His beloved Spouse, a visible sacrifice (corresponding to the requirements of human nature) by which that bloody sacrifice, which was to be accomplished once and for all on the cross, might be made present again and remain as His memorial until the end of the age and its salutary power might be applied for the remission of those sins

committed by us daily, as He declared that He had been constituted “priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek,” (Ps. 109:4) He offered to God the Father His own Body and Blood under the appearances of bread and wine and under the symbols of the same realities He handed them over to His disciples (whom He was constituting priests of the New Testament) for consumption, and through these words He ordered them and their successors in the priesthood to offer [the sacrifice], “Do this in memory of me.” (DS 1741)

Evil Conquered

The strict visual parallelism between the cross and the Eucharist manifests Gibson’s intent to underline the complete liberty with which Jesus is sacrificing Himself. On Holy Thursday He accomplishes with deliberate prevision what He realizes under duress on Good Friday. His sufferings are no chance happening, no plan for human amelioration gone sadly awry, but the will of the Father freely accepted. At the Last Supper Jesus employs the sacrificial imagery of the Old Testament to characterize His self-giving unto death. A New Covenant in His blood is being established. Christianity is not another variant expression of mankind’s amorphous religious sensibility for mystery. Liberal theology collapses before the new mystery established through suffering, the secular mind boggles, and Jews look on in wonder. Here, as in no other place, philosophy, or myth, the problem of evil is directly confronted. Only God can conquer evil, and only by the Son of God’s death can Christianity discover a meaning in suffering which can satisfy the heart and head of rebellious man. Precisely in the most abysmal suffering God’s love for man is proclaimed and realized. God evacuates death and evil, filling its void with Himself. By stupendous alchemy God transmutes the dross of human experience into the golden link uniting man again with God. Nothing in this world can separate man from God, everything can bring him closer to God. That is why the New Testament is replete with reports of Christians rejoicing in their sufferings. Fidelity in suffering manifests love of God in the footsteps of Jesus.

The transmutation of human suffering is understood differently, but not necessarily contrarily, by evangelicals and Catholics. Looking on Jesus, evangelicals accept the mystery with joy and do not seek to invade the inner counsels of Providence . Through Jesus they know that His sufferings prove the love of God and they only have to accept in faith that crucified love into their lives and let themselves be transformed by it. Catholics seek to develop a theology of what John Paul II calls in *Salvifici Doloris* “the creative nature of [redemptive] suffering” (19-24). To do so the letter transcends traditional natural theology, which separates Catholics from Protestants. Although initially the pope’s analysis of suffering proposes its traditional Scholastic interpretation as the “privation of an owed good,” (7) he recognizes that suffering “seems to be in a singular way characteristic of man’s nature,” manifesting his depths and opening him to something transcending himself (2). Christ’s cross reveals that in man’s redemption suffering is most deeply intertwined with love (3, 14); suffering can produce solidarity (8). Moreover, because God’s Son took suffering upon

Himself, His self-emptying opened redemptive suffering to men (19f.,22). For love can generate good from evil through suffering (18). When men become sharers in Christ's suffering, suffering becomes "a good" (24). Clearly the pope transcends Scholastic philosophy. Throughout his writings he understands man, the image of God, precisely as freedom for self-giving. Thereby he relativizes the categories of a philosophy of nature and approximates evangelical emphasis on the decision for Christ which Christ effects through the manifestation of His boundless love. Fides et Ratio acknowledges that the problem of suffering cannot be resolved by reason alone; the deeper wisdom of faith is required (26f., 32-35).

The perplexity which exasperates every philosophy is truly Jesus Christ's death on the Cross. It is here that every attempt to reduce the Father's saving plan to purely human logic is doomed to failure.... Man cannot grasp how death could be the source of life and love; yet to reveal of the mystery of His saving plan God has chosen precisely that which reason considers "foolishness" and a "scandal."... Reason cannot eliminate the mystery of love which the Cross represents, while the Cross can give to reason the ultimate answer which it seeks. It is not the wisdom of words, but the Word of Wisdom which Saint Paul offers as the criterion of both truth and salvation.... The preaching of Christ crucified and risen is the reef upon which the link between faith and philosophy can break up, but it is also the reef beyond which the two can set forth upon the boundless ocean of truth. (23)

Reason, discombobulated by evil, is saved only within the wider context of faith. That almost seems to be a Protestant position. Yet reason is needed to guarantee human freedom's mooring. For both papal letters uphold the Catholic understanding of freedom that cooperates in response to the divine prevenient love creating man's response. Is that not similar to the transformation of life by faith in God's love which evangelicals preach?[7] And does it not give a deeper meaning to the sufferings which all human beings are called upon to bear? To develop a theology of suffering surpasses the limits of this article.[8] But some conclusions can be drawn.

Conclusions

"The Passion of the Christ" is an unsettling film, raising questions which reveal the insufficiencies of Western civic religion. A vague God, worshiped equally by all religions, does not bless our enterprises. Christianity presents a unique challenge because the mysteries of suffering, death, and evil are overcome only by a crucified God, who calls men to let themselves be crucified with Him. The cross divides by demanding a decision. The secularist refuses to accept the abdication of his autonomy but is cast back upon inadequate resources before the greater mystery of life and suffering. The cross warns the liberal theologian that God cannot be adapted to the world but must be preferred unambiguously to the world. Jews and Christians alike must confess that, despite their common roots, much divides them. Jews cannot expect Christians to deny the witness of

the Gospels to their complicity in the death of Jesus, but they should also try to understand that true Christians look on themselves as primarily guilty for Jesus' death, a death which Jesus freely undertook for all men. To call the Gospels anti-Semitic can only contribute to anti-Semitism insofar as it builds walls of incomprehension between Jews and authentic Christians. Yet Christians should be sensitive to the Jewish past in which the charge of deicide has stirred up anti-Semitic persecutions. Moreover, they should show by their words and actions that Christ's love does not condemn but justifies sinners, that His love extends to all men, and that the divine election of Israel is still to bear fruit (Rom. 11:25-32). If God's will is to be accomplished, as Christians believe and hope, and if Jews are to be united to Christians in the same olive root (Rom. 11:13-24), that reconciliation can only be accomplished by self-sacrificial love. That is the task challenging Jewish-Christian dialogue and cooperation.

Finally, "The Passion," however much it reveals the underlying rifts in Western civic religion, may contribute to greater understanding and unity between evangelicals and orthodox Catholics. Both recognize that the film addresses their understanding of Christianity. Catholics can rejoice in the fervor of evangelical acceptance of Christ and their willingness, for His sake, to stand against the permissive, secular culture. Their own basic assurance of the reality of sin and of the sacrifice required to overcome it is strengthened by the witness of evangelicals. For their part evangelicals might recognize that Catholics too can have a personal relation with their Savior and that Mary can lead them to, not away from, her Son. Indeed the sacraments are not magical moments but means of effecting the deeper conversion to Christ crucified. If evangelicals want to bathe themselves in the blood of the Lamb, Catholics, taking literally the words of institution, drink deeply of the Lord's Eucharistic Blood so that, consumed, it might transform them. Does not the Catholic pray with evangelical fervor the *Anima Christi*: "Blood of Christ, inebriate me!"? Much can be hoped for Evangelical-Catholic understanding in the wake of "The Passion." For that, at the very least, Mel Gibson can be thanked.

[1] This is a rough estimate. A talent was worth 6,000 denarii, and a denarius was the daily wage for an average worker. Granted an American worker earning \$30,000 for 300 days work a year, one arrives at a substantial equivalent. In any case Jesus' parable tells of the forgiveness of a fabulous debt.

[2] Cf. E. Jünger, *Paulus und Jesus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1962), pp. 135-174; F. Borsch, *Many Things in Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), pp. 12-16; J. Donahue, S.J., *The Gospel in Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), pp. 13-17; H. Henricks, *The Parables of Jesus*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & row, 1986), pp. 3-13.

[3] On Jesus' relation to the Son of Man title cf. J. McDermott, S.J., "Luke XII, 8-9: Stone of Scandal," *Revue Biblique* 84 (1977), 523-537, and "Luc XII, 8-9: Pierre angulaire," *ibid.* 85 (1978), 381-401. On the structure of parable-sacrament for Jesus' life and preaching cf. *ibid.*, "Jesus: Parable or Sacrament of God?" *Gregorianum* 78 (1997), 477-499; 79 (1998), 543-564.

[4] Cf. J. McDermott, S.J., *The Bible on Human Suffering* (Middlegreen: St. Paul, 1990), pp. 130-142.

[5] M. Soloveichik, M. "The Virtue of Hate," *First Things* (Feb., 2003), 41-46.

[6] H. R. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937; rpt. New York : Harper & Row, 1959), p. 193

[7] For an attempt, relying on the pope's suggestions, to offer a "proof" for God's existence in which freedom and "faith" cooperate cf. J. McDermott, S.J., "Faith, Reason, and Freedom," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 67 (2002), 307-332.

[8] For some intimations cf. McDermott, S.J., Bible, and "Sofferenza," *Dizionario di teologia fondamentale*, ed. R. Latourelle, R. Fisichella (Assisi: Cittadella, 1990), 1154-1160. (Unfortunately the English publication bowdlerized the text for the sake of "inclusive language," without the author's permission or knowledge, and so mangled his meaning and even attributed a heresy to him.)