

Statement from the Archdiocese of Detroit: “The Passion of the Christ”
Ecumenical and Interfaith Advisor Provides Context to Movie

As Catholics, we have begun to embrace the joyful season of Lent, a time of preparation for the proclamation of Christ’s Passion and for the celebration of the Easter sacraments of reconciliation and regeneration. We rededicate ourselves to the traditional trilogy of the penitential lifestyle of prayer, fasting and charity. We might gather as family and friends to view a video or some television specials on topics of faith, and we might even see a religious movie, such as *The Passion of the Christ*.

Our Church teaches that neither the Jews at the time of Christ nor Jews today can be charged with his death. We are all sinners, thus all of us are the guilty ones for the crimes surrounding his passion and death. It would be tragic and abhorrent for anyone to use this film to stir up anti-Semitic feelings (see *Nostra Aetate*, §4). As Pope John Paul recently said, "As we now approach the 40th anniversary of this historic document (*Nostra Aetate*, the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council's condemnation of anti-Semitism), there is regrettably a great need to repeat our utter condemnation of racism and anti-Semitism."

A very helpful book has just been released by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), entitled, *The Bible, the Jews and the Death of Jesus: A Collection of Catholic Documents*. This collection promises to help pastoral leaders and dialogue partners to better respond to contemporary dramatizations, as well as to understand the four passion accounts of the Gospels in their proper context and theological understandings. It will help us to address contemporary concerns, especially in preaching about the rapport between Christians and Jews, and to appreciate better the teachable moments among us and between us as we celebrate the crux and pinnacles of our faith at these holy seasons.

As USCCB official Eugene Fisher notes, “*making it clear that it is our sins, not those of the individual actors on the events themselves, that bear the responsibility for Jesus’ death, lies at the very heart of the Christian heart of the Gospel. Both Christians and Jews involved in the dialogue rightly understand that removing once and for all the ancient charge of ‘deicide’ is the litmus test for the integrity of all our efforts, on both sides, since the council to bring about the reconciliation of the church with God’s people, the Jews.*”

The USCCB Film and Broadcasting Office reviewed the movie thus: “*Although the film’s brutality poignantly conveys the depth of Christ’s love by showing him freely enduring such extreme agony for the redemption of sinners, the graphic nature of the raw visuals is played to diminishing returns. Following the basic outline of the gospel passion narratives, director Mel Gibson embroiders his interpretive reading of scripture with*

extra-biblical sources as well as his own imagination to craft an at times profoundly moving movie which succeeds in stripping Christ's sacrificial suffering of its Sunday school sugar-coating. While it is the film's assertion that responsibility for Christ's torture and death rest squarely with the Roman authorities, and away from the collective Jewish populace, the movie presents a historically skewed depiction of the Temple elite's sway with their imperial overlords. ...Gory scenes of torture and crucifixion, a suicide and some frightening images." The USCCB Office for Film and Broadcasting rating is A-III (adults). The Motion Picture Association of America rated it "R" (restricted).

We are eager for all our Lenten observances to invite us to a complete change of heart. We need to be attentive to the challenges that face us in our contemporary society, and how we look to the Scriptures and Church teaching to keep us on the paths of reconciliation and understanding together."

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