

# Archdiocese of Detroit

Detroit's Ecumenical and Interfaith Advisor Offers Perspective

## FILM REVIEW: "The Passion of the Christ"

It's very late Ash Wednesday, the beginning of our forty days of Lent, and this pastor, who is also a moral theologian, would like to go home and reflect on the spiritual invitation of this day to change our hearts, as well as the overwhelming response of the thousands of people who came to our Church today to be signed with ashes and who heard anew, "you are dust, and unto dust, you shall return."

But the day is not done, for this year Ash Wednesday includes the premiere of the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. (<http://www.thepassionofthechrist.com/splash.htm>) The people of the parish are talking about it, due to all the advance publicity. I need to create a movie review, since I am also the director of ecumenical and interfaith rapport for the Archdiocese of Detroit. So the day will end in the theatre and the composition of this review.

First, the overall impact of this film was very powerful. It was like the feeling I had when I have been in the dentist's chair, and the doctor used gas to calm me, but he needed to put a very heavy vest on my chest. At the end of the movie in the locale where I viewed it, no one moved, and there was the sound of people crying. It was like an evocative pall came over the audience. If nothing else, director Mel Gibson knows how make a movie! It was an overwhelmingly graphic rendition of the events of the last twelve hours of the life of Jesus that moved people. But it was the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Gibson's personal "vision." (His word.) This writer and producer obviously chose scenes and narrative from all four Gospels, out of context, and interwove them with other extra-biblical sources, some from obscure 19<sup>th</sup> Century mystics, and some that must have arisen from his own spirituality. The result is a highly imaginative and selective rendition of these first century events. For example, as a serious student of biblical preaching, I was puzzled at the introduction of a "temptress" into the story. There is no satanic figure in any of the four gospel accounts of the passion, much less portrayed as a woman.

Second, I think we have a very teachable and reachable moment here. With lots of people flocking to this film, the religious community has an opportunity to highlight the passion narratives in the proper context of facts, faith and filmmaking. Since the film is viewed in an entertainment venue, one can never be sure what conclusion will be drawn by the moviegoers. Some could read these events in a very anti-Semitic mindset, as have many of the passion plays and movies down through the centuries. The Catholic tradition has been strong in its conviction that theologically, responsibility for the death of Jesus lies with the sins of all humanity, not just the particular Jews, or all Jews, or the Romans who were historically involved. There are some helpful resources for Christians who want to get the message right. The Catholic Church in the United States has just published *The Bible, the Jews and the Death of Jesus: A Collection of Catholic Documents*. (<http://www.usccb.org/comm/archives/2004/04-024.htm>) The Christian Scholars Group on Jewish Christian Relations ([http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/partners/CSG/passion\\_guide.htm](http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/partners/CSG/passion_guide.htm)), located at Boston College, has a very helpful study guide and other practical resources.

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## The Passion of the Christ—SECOND ADD

Third, I have a concern for the amount of violence that I saw. Crucifixion and the related punitive measures such as scourging were probably some of the most vicious and extreme in the world history of capital punishment. We are in the midst of a very violent winter on the streets of our city of Detroit. Violence breeds violence. I know the death of Jesus was extremely violent, but I found this portrayal to be over the edge of my sensitivities. Our U.S. Bishops' Office for Film and Broadcasting has a movie rating system much like the motion picture industry has. Brief but excellent reviews and classifications of current movies are given at [www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org), (<http://www.usccb.org/movies/index.htm>) and updated every week. Yes, the original passion of Jesus was extremely violent, but I found that almost one-quarter of the movie was dedicated to the excessive scourging scene that the Gospels treat in one sentence to be just too much. This is not a movie for children, and I doubt it would much better for adolescents, especially those with personal sensitivities and queasy stomachs. Thus the USCCB gave it their A-III rating, limiting suggested viewing to adults.

Much more could be said, and many voices are being heard in the review and study of this film. In so many ways it is "just a movie," but it has become a lightning rod at the beginning of Lent to direct us in a responsible way to contemplate the face of Jesus, dying and rising in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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