



More than a Masterpiece

Mel Gibson's film on the final 12 hours in the life of Jesus is more than a masterpiece of cinematographic art. *The movie — as the director tells us — simply seeks to tell the truth. I wanted it to be as real as possible. Christ suffered and died for everyone. That was the reason he came and died on the cross. That is why everyone who sins needs to admit his own fault and responsibility. The time has come to return to the basic message we received. The world has gone mad. Christ spoke about faith, hope, love and forgiveness. He forgave his torturers and killers. We also need to take something of this attitude.*

The director makes use of the language of film to reproduce in the minutest detail the shocking gospel accounts of the passion and death of Jesus. His total fidelity to the Gospel texts, the use of Aramaic and Latin used by the Jews and Romans of the time, the painstaking reconstruction of Jerusalem and the topography of the place where these dramatic events took place — all this enables the viewer of the film to become a participant in the single most important

event in human history. It was the event that determined our salvation. It marked Christ's definitive victory over Satan, sin and death.

Mel Gibson is a deeply convicted Catholic, a staunch believer in conjugal fidelity and the sanctity of life from conception to natural death. He has seven children. His 24 years of marriage are a shining example of true marital and fatherly love. He is a daily communicant and devotes a good part of every day

to personal prayer. His success as a Hollywood actor won him fame, an Oscar, and great wealth. At the height of his career, at the age of 35, he fell away from his faith. *I fell into a nightmarish situation — he recalls — a real nightmare. So terrible that I was ready to leap out of a window....When you reach that point, when you don't want to live and you don't want to die, that is a nightmare. I just fell on my knees. I had to immerse myself in Christ's passion and wounds to heal my own wounds.*

After this experience, Gibson returned to the practice of his Catholic faith with the zeal of a convert. *I believe — he said in an interview with USA Today — that my entire career led me to making this movie. As I was filming it, I felt the Holy Spirit speaking through me. All I did was do what I felt guided to do. It's my hope this movie will convey the power of the Gospel.*

The director set out to change people's thoughts and attitudes so that by viewing Christ's suffering they could suffer with Him. Only then could they understand that

Jesus suffered and died for us and for our salvation.

The aim of this movie — says Gibson — is to tell the truth. I want it to be as faithful to the truth as possible so that everyone seeing it will stop to think about the reasons why Christ came and why He was crucified. He died for the whole human race, suffered for all of humanity. So really everyone who sins should see the role he plays in this, and accept responsibility.

The making of *The Passion of the Christ* was a moving experience for the entire filming crew. *We had among us Muslims, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, as well as agnostics — observes Gibson — and we all worked in perfect harmony.* Mass was said every day before work began on the film set. While the Sermon on the Mount scene was being shot, Jim Caviezel, who plays the role of Jesus, was struck by lightning and survived. All the actors witnessed this extraordinary event. In their spare time people held lively discussions on the subject of faith. The mood and intensity of the spiritual experiences during the filming of the *Passion* was so strong that several Muslims and agnostics embraced the Christian faith.

For Mel Gibson himself, the movie became the cause of undeserved suffering, a personal experience of Christ's way of



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the cross. He was unfairly condemned, attacked, mocked and derided for his courage in confessing his faith and adherence to the teachings of the Catholic Church. On opening night of the *Passion* in the USA, Gibson said: *I've become the object of a witch-hunt. As an artist I can't be offended, and I forgive those who have attacked me: But I have to say: Enough! We can't let bigots dictate the way we live, believe and do art. They've made a villain out of me. Yet all I do is pray. For myself, for my family, for the world.*

For people of good will, Gibson's *Passion* is a moving experience. It is an invitation to come to know more closely the person of Christ, who desires to offer everyone His boundless mercy and a part in His victory over sin and death.

Everything in the Passion comes straight from the Gospel. There is nothing in the film that does not come from there. Those who criticize the film criticize the Gospel — said Archbishop John Foley, President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communication, after seeing the film. Observed Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua: For me art is a manifestation of God's attributes, His beauty, His mercy, His love. The Passion contains all these things. It shows God's infinite love for us, and what He has done for us. Cardinal Castrillon Hoyos, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy observed: On seeing the film, I experienced a profound spiritual closeness with Jesus Christ. This film leads the viewer toward prayer, reflection and meditation that flows from the deepest recesses of the heart.

I have read accounts of the Lord's Passion — said Cardinal Francis George of Chicago — I have meditated on them and used many of them in my prayers, many times, but I have never reflected on the Crucifixion with the aid of such images as came to me upon viewing this film. I will never read these words the same way again.

On viewing the film, the Holy Father himself is alleged to have said: *It is as it was.*



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