

The Passion of the Christ: A Catholic Response

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- I. General impression:** The extreme violence and brutality of the film were intended to convey the need to repair the sinful condition of the world, the burden of sin borne by the Suffering Servant. However, the lessons conveyed in the introductory text from Isaiah 53 and in subtitles did not provide sufficient doctrinal foundation for many viewers to recognize the human dilemma of alienation from God or the theological doctrine that vicarious suffering by the Messiah/Son of God resolved the tragic situation. Christians who are quite familiar with the Gospel would be able to absorb the words flashed momentarily on the screen, but would others pick up the profound message? The mystery of reconciliation with God cannot be measured by the degree of physical abuse heaped upon Jesus.

Emphasis on the Passion with only a brief scene of Jesus' triumph in the Resurrection does not convey any insight into the means whereby the Gospels show that the work of forgiveness is accomplished. Nor is the gift of new life elucidated in any way, even though flashbacks to the Last Supper narrative include the Eucharistic gifts. More "flashbacks" should have included the work of the Apostles as collaborators with Christ; this should have been a prelude to a commissioning scene at the end, either Matthew 28:19-20 or, better yet, with explicit reference to forgiveness of sins, to John 20:21-23. Nowhere does one obtain an insight that Jesus founded a community of faith (the Church) as the vehicle for continuing the work of redemption.

The denial of Peter should have been completed by a flashback to Jesus' prayer for him at the Last Supper: "...I have prayed for you... and when you have turned again strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31-32).

The theology of the suffering of Jesus seems to be very inadequate. Is God being propitiated by brutality? Rather, the fidelity of Jesus to the Father's will, his resolution to persevere and his patience under duress might have been stressed by additional flashbacks to his teachings. While suffering vicariously, he is providing the example of those virtues, especially *agape* (charity), which are to become the pattern for his disciples in their lives of service.

- II. Characterization of key personalities:** The role of Mary, Mother of Jesus, is portrayed effectively. Identifying Mary Magdalene as the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11) is an example of artistic license. Absence of dialogue at this point was strange. A more traditional identification would have been with the sinful woman in Luke 7:36-50. Her plea to Roman soldiers to save Jesus from his captors is an unfortunate embellishment. This certainly implies that Romans were "good guys" with the potential to rescue Jesus. The Beloved Disciple seemed to be inadequate to the task of witnessing to the truth (John 19:35).

Pontius Pilate is portrayed much too positively. The conversation about his dilemma concerning an impending insurrection seems to come from *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* of Sister Anne Catherine Emmerich (an Augustinian nun in Bavaria, 1774-1824).

Caiaphas, Annas and the Sanhedrin members are uniformly portrayed as villains; naming Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea as members declining to be involved in the night trials and linking them by name with the scene of descent from the cross would have been helpful. Having priests wear the priestly breastplates and prayer shawls all day caricatures these instruments of worship.

The force of evil, meant to represent the prince of darkness, seemed unrelated to the serpent (pointing back to Gen 3:15). "She" might have disappeared until the scene of ultimate defeat. Then no viewer would think of human evildoers as direct agents of Satan. What is to be made of the strange, bald child?

III. Anti-Jewish motifs: The arrest in Gethsemani with chains, followed by the bridge scene (where Jesus encounters Judas under the bridge) come from Emmerich, as does bribing people to become the crowd. The scenes of the so-called Sanhedrin trial (which should have been portrayed as the manipulative work of a small clique) and the mob scenes before Pilate certainly portray Jews in an extremely negative light. Would some in an audience take home the idea that "the Jews" as a people cried out for Jesus' death? It will take concerted efforts at education to overcome the tendency to generalize. Will Simon of Cyrene's words to Caiaphas regarding Jesus' prayer of forgiveness (Luke 23:34) be recalled? This non-biblical element offers a rare positive example of interpretative license.

The earthquake is shown rattling Pilate's quarters; then the scene moves to devastation of the chamber of the Sanhedrin and the Temple area. Rather than show the rending of the Temple veil (which can be understood as the Father mourning the death of the Son), the picture is a dramatic splitting of rocks. There is no return shot to Pilate's place, so the viewer has an impression of God's judgment on the Jewish institution and its leaders. It would be easy to generalize concerning the Jewish people. Average viewers would think that the Temple has suffered major structural damage. In the last scene of *Ben Hur* the hero returns home and finds the mezuzah on the doorpost damaged. The implication that Judaism is "finished" would be even clearer to the average viewer of Gibson's portrayal of the earthquake as a sign of divine judgment (contrary to Luke 24:53; Acts 3:1, etc. showing that the first Christians frequented the Temple).

The truncated presentation of Jesus' passion and death does a serious disservice to the Paschal Mystery as the doctrine central to the Christian faith (see Romans 4:25; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4). The passion-death-resurrection-ascension-sending of the Holy Spirit constitute a continuity best interpreted in the light of the Passover-Exodus-Weeks (Pentecost) themes in Jewish liturgy. Poetic and artistic license may be invoked by a producer-director, aware that the motion picture is a medium for presenting history that can be evocative without ever being complete. Perhaps one may hint at truths of a theological nature but an audio-visual experience cannot claim to present "the truth." Any effort to make this film a "teaching tool" for Christians will fall short in serious ways.

May those who see this film be stimulated to learn more about the entire Gospel message and its implications for their lives. May all who have questions about historical details, especially concerning those Jews and Romans involved in the Passion, look carefully for appropriate answers. Our concern is that some will walk away from the movie theater without looking further for an uplifting message.