“Another View”

Op-Ed essays

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Impassioned rhetoric precedes the trailers

February 4, 2004

published in The Morning Call newspaper (Lehigh Valley, PA)

CENTER VALLEY – Mel Gibson’s new film cannot be released soon enough. Until it does come out, few are able to grasp what it seeks to portray. In the meantime, talk of controversy offers only self-fulfilling rhetoric that fails to attend to the decidedly more significant questions that this film raises for our personal reflection.

Though intended to facilitate dialogue and foster understanding, Peter Pettit’s editorial (in The Morning Call, 1/25/04) merely aggravates the situation. Carefully crafted to include Roman Catholic references that appear supportive, his position relies on suggestions and implications. Two, in particular, disclose a larger conflict underlying the controversy.

First, to suggest that “Catholic scholars” who critiqued Mel Gibson’s script are in a position to apply “official church standards” in “calling a son of the church to accountability” reveals a lack of distinction between theological reflection and magisterial instruction. While debate is welcomed throughout academic circles, no scholar, whether at Boston College or even DeSales University, speaks on behalf of “official” Catholicism. That is a bishop’s job. Absent demonstrable distortions of the biblical or historical record, those critiques remain but personal perspectives, regardless of the supposed scholarship from which they issue.

But among those who are in a position to speak the mind of the Catholic Church, consider the Reverend J. Augustine DiNoia, O.P., undersecretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (the Vatican department charged with promoting “official” church teaching). Unlike the scholars who cried controversy, he actually saw the film! Characterizing it as “an intensely religious experience,” he welcomes “the director’s profound spiritual insight into the theological meaning of the passion and death of Christ.” He considers it “a production of exquisite artistic and religious sensitivity” and concludes that it “is entirely faithful to the New Testament.”
Second, to imply that Gibson’s film may “add to that reservoir [of anti-Semitic images and accusations] or encourage the dipping of poison from it” bespeaks a bias that confounds story and documentary, art and (mis)interpretation. The biblical accounts of the death and resurrection of Jesus are not historical records of what actually happened. Nor is their purpose to generate anti-Semitic hatred or religious warfare. Rather, as the Second Vatican Council affirms, the Gospels “faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation,” with the intention of helping successive generations learn "the truth" of those words and deeds.

Lamentably, contempt and conflict are an undeniable and inexcusable part of the later history of Jewish-Christian relations. For this reason, Pope John Paul II, on his visit to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, proclaimed “that the Catholic Church ... is deeply saddened by the hatred, acts of persecution and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews by Christians at any time and in any place.”

Yet, according to news reports, John Paul II also expressed an opinion about this movie after seeing it himself. The pope’s words manifested no accusation, no poison, no hatred, just a gut-wrenching realization: “it is as it was.”

The controversy whose source Dr. Pettit locates in the biblical Passion story is not anti-Semitic in nature. It is anthropological and existential. It is a conflict that takes place in the soul of every human being, now as then, flawed sinners that we all are. It compels each of us to ask how our sins contribute to the suffering that we all experience in this world. It provokes each of us to ponder a new way of living that the Passion makes possible for all of humanity.

The “passion” that the viewer will see in Mel Gibson’s movie lies not only in the degree to which an innocent man willingly suffers. It also encompasses the breadth and depth of love that only a divine being can have for all people. The extent to which it is controversial derives from its real subject – not the actions of past historical figures, be they Romans or Jews or others, but the person of Jesus the Christ.

Like Dr. Pettit, at Muhlenberg College, we at DeSales University also seek to focus on the evangelical power of this film. On March 3rd, we will be hosting a Center Valley Forum about “The Passion” which will feature Jewish scholars, Catholic theologians, and film professors.

We can appreciate Dr. Pettit’s concern. We must abhor religious hatred, past and present. We should continue to dialogue and strive to understand.

But first, let us see the film and experience its passion ourselves.

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