CENTER VALLEY – A week after the premiere of “The Passion of the Christ,” society remains abuzz with talk about both the movie and the event that inspired it. Some have sobbed. Others may wonder. Still others will disagree or object. Everyone, it seems, has staked a position or expressed an opinion – which, of itself, indicates the power that the passion holds for believers and non-believers alike.

Twenty-five years ago today, this same theme emerged as the subject for Pope John Paul II’s first written work. Entitled “Redemptor Hominis” (“The Redeemer of Humanity”), this document signaled to the world the dual concern that would mark his entire papacy: humanity’s ultimate well-being and the divine act of passion that makes it possible.

Without benefit of a film’s visceral realism, the pope paints pictures with words. Without recourse to cinematic flashbacks, he recalls the historical event that still profoundly affects the world. Without the fury and frenzy that has accompanied Mel Gibson’s film release, John Paul II communicates a valuable dramatic lesson.

Writing in the form of an encyclical letter, the highest authority of papal teaching, the pope’s text begins with humble trepidation. There he confesses that his first words upon being elected were: “With obedience in faith to Christ ... in spite of the great difficulties, I accept.” Who could have imagined the host of difficulties he would face over the next twenty-five years. Yet, recourse to the redemption would be his continual point of reference and constant source of strength.

But his is not merely one person’s faith, nor is his teaching limited to a Christian audience. As we have come to know from his globetrotting voyages, his countless meetings with geopolitical powers, and his engagement with leaders of all faith traditions, this pope, like no other we have known, situates the message of the passion of the Christ in humanistic terms: “The redemption
of the world ... is, at its deepest root, the fullness of justice in a human Heart ... in order that it may become justice in the hearts of many human beings ... called to grace, called to love.”

The language he uses can be dense, the philosophy that undergirds his thought rather deep. But the reflection he offers comes from basic human experience: “Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it.”

Twenty-five years later, we live in a world of new discoveries and amazing developments, but we continue to face an increasing amount of violence against persons and the ever-present risk of alienation from ourselves. The need for love is perennial.

John Paul II remains convinced that human life enjoys an incomparable worth and dignity. This is the good news he has preached throughout his papacy and which he presaged in that first letter: “Above all, love is greater than sin, ... it is stronger than death; it is a love always ready to raise up and forgive ... and in man's history this revelation of love and mercy has taken a form and a name: that of Jesus Christ.”

Because of the divine passion for all humanity, because love is and always will be greater than sin and suffering, people today need not be afraid. That message might get lost in Gibson’s portrayal of the passion, in which relentless scourging and excruciating torture seem to cross the line of believability. One could, as some have done, draw from this film the mistaken conclusion that the Christ’s passion was a pitiable death meant to avenge a wrathful God.

John Paul II leads us to a different conclusion. Turning Catholicism outward, to engage the modern world in which we all live, he wrote that the Christ “speaks to people also as Man: it is his life that speaks, his humanity, his fidelity to the truth, his all-embracing love. Furthermore, his death on the Cross speaks—that is to say the inscrutable depth of his suffering and abandonment.”

Divine solicitude, not a political power play, is the real source of the passion. Authentic human solidarity, not increased religious sectarianism, should be its outcome. For people of any religious persuasion, and even those of none, the pope’s twenty-five year message that “love is greater than sin” can provide a renewed passion for our lives.

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