

## On *The Passion of the Christ*, I

There are few films which have affected so many and affected them as profoundly as the *Passion of the Christ*. The movie was surrounded by controversy. And knowing that most of our parishioners have seen the film, and are deeply moved by it, and have posed a number of questions about it, I thought I'd comment on some of those controversies or questions, and on some of the comments I've heard about the film or its maker from sources outside the parish.

1. "Depiction of extreme and graphic horror can take one deeper into the mystery, or coarsen and brutalize us further."

True enough. There are lots of easy listenin' movies about our Lord...they gloss quickly over the price He had to pay. But Gibson's movie makes us uncomfortable. Good. Mission accomplished. It can shock us out of our complacency, and makes us wonder if we are worthy of His sacrifice.

Usually the artistic elites and chattering classes automatically applaud any art that shocks people out of complacency. But they attack this movie because they have spent their adult lives avoiding, ignoring and ridiculing the subject of it. So it's a subversive movie to those classes. It's subversive and dangerous to those with no faith.

2. "Our culture enjoys anxiety-producing, relentlessly noisy, violent, pedal-to-the-metal sensationalism and intense emotional negativism. This movie is another example of that."

*Semper distinguere*, St. Thomas Aquinas once said. "Always distinguish." If a man cannot distinguish between *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, by saying that there is too much blood in all of them, or that they are all violent, then there is little or nothing that can be said to explain the differences. We're almost at the level of first principle here. I'm not a big fan of the LOTR films, or of the books, though I saw them all and enjoyed them. The books I read as a boy, but I find myself unable to go back to that excitement I felt long ago. For me, they pale in comparison to the drama of the Diary of St. Faustina (which I'm reading slowly now).

But Gandalf's stand at the bridge in the mines of Moira does remind one of the Roman soldier Horatio. Valor, bravery, resoluteness in the face of impossible odds; these are not immediately beautiful things in reality, since war is ugly, sloppy, confusing, disorganized, and mixed up with much evil. I remember someone wondering (after seeing *Saving Private Ryan*), "Is anything worth that much suffering and death?" I'm not sure if this was just a grouching about France, but contained in it was an irritation about the violence of the film. Not to look at horror is a mistake, I think, since France lost against Germany in WWII partly because it did not want to relive the horror of WWI.

Be that as it may, it is a fact that idealized portraits of valor are necessary for civilization. These acts are glorious because they save one's comrades, one's wives, one's children. And pure realism is a false idol.

So is the film over-the-top sensationalism? It is certainly hard to watch, and loud in its portrayal of the Passion. But since our culture is deaf to the old virtues, as Flannery O'Connor once put it, "To the hard of hearing, you shout." Maybe we needed a little shouting about the subject. For those not blessed by faith, depiction's like Gibson's (as well as paintings of times gone by such as Matthias Gruenewald's, which I've been showing to the home school kids) might seem to involve a fixation on human brutality. But it seems necessary to me to have these depictions, because they bring home the evil of the world, and how much all of us can be complicit in that evil through our sins. For me, Gruenewald portrays this on a higher plane than Gibson's film. And Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion* does this on a higher level than Gruenewald, and the *Lamentations* of St. Jeremias are higher than Bach. And to sing the Passion on Palm Sunday and Good Friday breaks my heart. But I'll always need to look at a good crucifix, and things like this film, because there is something about the lower levels of art, and only those levels, which drive home the point to the flesh. It may take the lower levels of art to do so, but the present culture badly needs to be shocked out of its stupid enlightenment optimism about humanity and its possibilities.

3. "The Scourging was not believable in the movie. No one could take that kind of punishment and still be alive, much less standing up. The movie was fake in that aspect."

This underestimates the ability of the human body to absorb punishment. It also underestimates how convincing torturers can be in making people do things they don't want to do.

I don't want to be disgusting here, but we know that in ancient Celtic culture, a common way to torture was to make an incision in the lower abdomen, pull out of section of intestine and nail it to a tree, and force the victim to walk around the tree (enough description) until he dies. As to whipping, the punishment meted out by the British Navy in the age of sail was extremely severe. In some cases, yes, men died. But in many cases they did not. The point is that those Celts and the British tars did survive many an astoundingly cruel punishment.

4. "The Hollywood-villain sadism portrayed in the movie was unnecessary. The Romans did so many crucifixions that they would not have had that energy, making this part of the film implausible."

I'm not so sure of that. There's no evidence that crucifixions were a daily event in Jerusalem. There may have been only 20 at most in a given year. Besides, this was a special event. This was no ordinary man, but one chosen over the worst murderer (Barrabbas) in the city; one suspected of harboring notions of taking over the kingship from Herod, or even the Emperor.

The attitude of the Romans in the scourging scene did not seem unrealistic either. The one in charge was treating it as a run-of-the-mill event. The two doing the whipping were probably sadists, and perhaps volunteered for the duty. Maybe they were taking out their anger on the Victim. I never knew any guys like that when I served, but they do exist in militaries. I'm reading a book at this time called Flyboys, by James Bradley. His description of the Japanese Imperial Army's training, and the way it behaved in the field with the Chinese during WWII, makes the soldiers in the film seem very, very plausible.