

Mel Gibson's *Passion*

Mel Gibson's film on the passion of Jesus Christ, released in 2004, was bound to be controversial. Neither critics nor believers go to the movies to encounter God in a film that depicts the Eternal Word incarnate and His life-giving sacrifice. The media, generally, place form over content, as colour photographs fill the pages of magazines and newspapers that in a more serious age would have been mainly print. Furthermore, the very nature of film seems to prohibit Gibson's choice of subject. It is a medium that demands realism. Consider, for example, *Master and Commander* or *Gladiator*, films which virtually recreate a past society and in doing so determine or alter a viewer's imagination of the past. What right has Gibson to substitute his production for what comes to us authentically in the Gospels and the liturgy? And then movies, even documentaries, are primarily entertainment. I found it distressing to see the overweight patrons of the cinema lugging in soft drinks and tubs of popcorn as they settled down to watch an actor portray the agony of Our Saviour. Gibson's project seemed defeated from the start: no presentation could overcome such barriers to the sober gravity the passion demands from the one who contemplates it in faith. And where there was no faith, the spectacle could invite only incomprehension or ridicule.

The last of these expectations was in fact realized in the reaction of the media to the film. It was called shoddy in its direction, gratuitous in its violence and, inevitably, anti-Semitic in its portrayal of the Jews. My fears having been formed and to some extent confirmed by such reviews, I was reluctant to attend the movie. To this hesitation was added a distaste for any film or theatrical presentation of Jesus, partly from a fear of irreverence and obscurely because I then had little desire to visit the Holy Land. I meet Jesus in the Eucharist, in Scripture, in prayer. He is as close to me, much closer than my dearest friend, much closer even than I am to myself, as Augustine noted: "*interior intimo meo.*" Consequently, I was happy to go as a pilgrim to Lourdes, I want to visit Santiago, and I was sorely disappointed at the cancellation of trip to Hippo Regius to see the excavations of Saint Augustine's church and monastery; but I did not at that time regret never having been to the Holy Land. Nor, I was sure, would I regret bypassing the cinematic journey that the film afforded.

Nevertheless, I had seen another film about Jesus, *The Gospel of John*. Aside from the execrable script—the Good News Bible—I found it pleasing. That was the first sign of an alteration in my religious as well as my artistic

suspicion of the project. As I watched *The Passion*, to my surprise I found myself weeping, and I continued to do so throughout. My tears flowed because I knew that my sins had caused the agony that no one by the Christ could have borne: “For our sake he made himself to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5.21). The man who bore the sins of all mankind would have suffered beyond description, and that is what Gibson attempted to portray. An unbeliever would be repelled by such scenes, admittedly because they are gruesome but also, I think, for another reason. To contemplate the torments of the God-man requires a response that must be either a yes or no to the Gospel summons: “He who rejects me and does not receive my sayings has a judge; the word that I have spoken will be his judge on the last day” (John 12.49). No one can be indifferent to the claims Jesus made, and one thing Gibson achieved was to close off the avenue of escape into art appreciation that modern pagans use to avoid the religious significance of great Christian masterpieces such as Bach’s *Saint Matthew Passion*, Michelangelo’s *Pietà*, Rublev’s *Old Testament Trinity*, and Manzoni’s *The Betrothed*. In short, a man’s reaction to the film reveals much about his reaction to the Gospel.

That last statement calls for further comment and some qualification, for many critics of the film are Christians. I am thinking particularly of the Orthodox who are severe in their judgments of other Christians and, especially, of Catholics. The Orthodox insist that, once Rome had definitively broken with Constantinople in A.D. 1054, heresy was inevitable, leaving the East alone as the preserve of authentic Christianity. Saint Augustine, typically, is the culprit in that his doctrine of Original Sin eventually produced Saint Anselm’s forensic caricature of the economy of salvation. Hence mediaeval Catholicism is rejected in its entirety for surrendering Christianity to feudal and, later, in the Renaissance, to humanist principles. Along with Augustine, not only Anselm but also Thomas Aquinas, Dante and other great Catholic thinkers are dismissed without a hearing. The very style of Catholic art—three dimensional, realistic—is proof, if proof is needed, of the decline into what is described as a denial of God’s transcendence. A Catholic, however, locates the origin of these principles and events in Christianity’s interaction with ancient Roman society, an experiment in inculturation that was as successful as the Eastern Church’s movement into Greek civilization. But Rome and Greece were different. The Roman genius was for law and politics; its virtues were gravity and simplicity. Once incorporated into the Church, these qualities gave rise to typical “Western” concerns such as grace and free will or man’s alienation from God through sin. An awareness of sin and its consequences

was deepened during the chaos of the Dark Ages, a period of social disintegration unknown to the Church of the Eastern Mediterranean. Out of that period rose the splendid civilization of mediaeval Europe, and it *was* splendid despite the near-universal contempt everyone seems to bear it. The Orthodox see it as the ruin of the patristic settlement which they continue to honour as the sole and exclusively valid form of Christianity. Protestants despise it for going beyond the text of Scripture in devotion and organization. European secularists wish to forget the great debt of contemporary society to the ages of faith. And liberal Catholics, itching for novelty, reject the civilization which gave their Church the form it kept and in which it flourished until the mid-twentieth century, with Vatican II. Orthodox critics of Catholicism, therefore, have many allies . . . and some strange bedfellows.

The mediaeval Church was based on the Incarnation: Christ, the Eternal Word who created man also saved him. There is nothing good in human society that is not from him and useful in his service. And so the mark of Catholicism has been, in theory if not always in practice, inculturation and with it the concomitant difficulties that Orthodoxy is all too ready to point out. But the alternative is no alternative at all, for the Orthodox, by absolutizing the Platonic Christianity of the Greek Fathers, have come effectively to deny the legitimacy of any other cultural expression of Christianity, including the ancient Roman. And so, whether they know it or not, they blame the Apostles for the schism of 1054; Saints Peter and Paul should never have gone to Rome! It's tempting to compare Orthodoxy to the Judaizers who opposed Saint Paul's welcoming gentiles into the Church and insisted that a convert had to become Jewish in order to become Christian—a not illogical position when you think about it, since that is what God himself did in preparing the chosen people for the coming of the Messiah. The Orthodox, with less reason, require a convert to become Greek in order to become a Christian. As a result—and this brings us back to *The Passion*—they cannot understand the piety of the late Middle Ages during which entire peoples were brought low under a series of catastrophes, of which the Black Death was only the most devastating. A religious people experiencing distress will always be tempted to interpret it as a punishment for their sins which, given the scope of their suffering, must have been great indeed. Nurtured as they were on Augustine's sublime theology, they felt overwhelmed by a sense of their sinfulness and then looked for solace to the suffering of Christ. His torturous death and glorious resurrection promised a release from their misery. The profound, often poetic, contemplation of the Man of Sorrows and of man's existence in a vale of tears focussed their attention on the present world. Heaven was hereafter, available once the

purifying sufferings of Purgatory had cleansed away all sin and all the effects of sin.

Orthodoxy, on the contrary, inhabits heaven now. Worship joins the faithful on earth to “the Divine Liturgy” offered by angels and saints before the throne of God. The other component of Orthodox spirituality—monasticism—is equally otherworldly. To become a monk is symbolically to die and then to come to life in heaven where the praise of God is one’s sole occupation. There was even a monastery in Constantinople of the *acoemetae*, i.e., “the sleepless,” in which the monks maintained a perpetual psalmody, in alternating choirs. This emphasis on heaven in its liturgy and monastic spirituality led Orthodoxy to the unspoken assumption that the general resurrection had already taken place. It’s an old error in the East, one that Saint Paul himself had to correct (1 Timothy 2.18). Icons, which are, of course, the only acceptable art, are windows that open onto the glories of heaven, so that the market place, politics, and the arts are put aside as baubles for the immature.

The root of these severe limitations is the rejection of the *Filioque* (“and from the Son”), the phrase we Catholics added to the Nicene Creed: “We believe in the Holy Spirit . . . who proceeds from the Father *and from the Son.*” By separating the Spirit from the Son, Orthodoxy floats off from the pressing temporalities that so greatly occupy Catholics. It willingly abandons the world to politicians and financiers who, believers or not, are entrusted with the management of the temporalities of the Church. With Heaven fully present, the physical world is more a distraction than a location of God’s action. Opposed to this view is Gibson’s *Passion*, which in its mediaeval piety is connected with Grünwald’s grisly crucifixion and the passion plays. As artistic, it searches for images that can convey the significance of the passion to modern man in cinematic parallel to Rubens or Caravaggio, for the twenty-first century has its own artistic modes, which Catholics will not shy away from. The vitality characteristic of such art leads to the vulgarity for which Catholicism is notorious; it’s the price one pays for being a popular religion. We leave impeccable taste to the Anglicans and the Orthodox.

Surprisingly, the film, quintessentially Catholic in its Eucharistic and Marian themes, appealed to Evangelical Protestants as much as it offended the Eastern Church. What drew Evangelical Christians to it? The Middle Ages, again, provide an answer. The fact is that classical Protestantism is an incomplete form of late mediaeval piety. Instinctively, despite their disgust with Catholicism, Evangelicals accept its conviction that man is saved because Christ suffered for him. The tragic events that caused mediaeval

Catholics to resort to penance, pilgrimages and (indulged) prayers were interiorized and individualized by Martin Luther to the point of near despair. The monastic routine had brought him no relief, only scruples which became more and more unbearable. His tortured soul then found solace in accepting the grace of Christ as assuring his salvation independently of his actions, good or evil. However desperate his plight or, rather, because of his desperation, he could rejoice in the free gift of salvation: *pecca fortiter, et crede firmius* (“Sin boldly, but believe more strongly”). His heirs, under the more logically consistent tutelage of John Calvin, learned to welcome the doctrine of “total depravity,” a depravity that continues even after conversion. The gratuitous favour of God brings consolation to sinners in the conviction that Christ has already paid for their sins. Hence the greater the sufferings of Jesus, the greater the confidence with which sinful man can face God, clothed in merits not his own but Christ’s.

These comments about *The Passion* have certainly substantiated my opening statement about the film's being controversial. That is as it should be, for good art necessarily forces the viewer to examine himself in the light of the truth the artist has presented in his work. This film is remarkable for bringing to light a wide range of attitudes towards religion and revelation, God and man. But we shall profit from the movie and the subsequent discussions only to the extent that we ponder anew, in the light of our faith in Jesus Christ, these perennial questions about the human condition.