

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*

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Gibson's Passion

A Case Study in Media Manipulation?

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Introduction

[1] When this symposium was organized, it was obvious that there would be plenty of attention focused on the Gibson film in anticipation of its commercial release a few weeks hence. But no one, I think, imagined that controversies over the film would bubble over like Strega Nonna's pasta pot (if you get the allusion), engulfing the Holy See itself. To say that this has been a press agent's dream is to understate the case on a truly biblical scale.

[2] I am standing before you because one of the things I do for a living is look at how the news media cover religion stories, or stories with significant religious content. The Greenberg Center's publication, *Religion in the News*, which I edit, appears three times a year and in the most recent issue we devote a couple of articles to the Gibson controversy - one by A.-J. Levine, a professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt (and a member of the scholars' committee that reviewed a script of the film), on coverage of the scriptural questions at issue; the other by William Dinges of Catholic University, on coverage of Catholic traditionalism. But we are still very much *in medias res*. Just by virtue of being a participant in this symposium I have in the past few days been interviewed by such varied publications as the *Boston Globe*, *Variety*, and the weekly *Forward*, and over the next few weeks we can expect that the coverage will continue to intensify. So what I have to say should be taken as provisional - an exploratory cruise through the Noahide flood.

[3] The question I have posed for myself - Is this a case of media manipulation? - is complicated by the fact that we are dealing here with two huge institutional nexuses, Hollywood and the Roman Catholic Church, that both have a longstanding and, one might say, radical commitment to

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managing any and all news about themselves. This means that, in each case, it is far from easy to establish the truth of what they are up to in order to determine the extent of the possible manipulation. Or, more charitably, one might say that both institutional nexuses are dedicated to the proposition that the truths of art and the truths of faith, respectively, may not always be best served by disclosing the truths about the people and institutions responsible for serving them up.

Initial Reports

[4] What I propose to do, then, is to offer a narrative of the coverage. Reports about the film began to be written in August 2002 - a *New York Daily News* article, for example, announcing that Gibson was scouting hillscapes in southern Italy to shoot the film. Reports in September that shooting would start in November. Gibson was rather blithe: The quote that was repeated again and again had to do with his decision to film the story in Latin and Aramaic - two dead languages. "They think I'm crazy, and maybe I am," he said. "But maybe I'm a genius."

[5] By January, however, Gibson was beginning to complain that there were people, muck-raking journalists, who were out to get him. The most detailed of the denunciations came in an appearance on Fox's "O'Reilly Factor," where Gibson said, "Since I've been in Rome here, for example, I know, there are people sent from reputable publications. . . ." "We have heard," O'Reilly rejoined, "that there is a reporter trying to dig up dirt on you, and who has bothered your 85-year-old father, trying to get provocative statements from him, and trying to portray you as a fanatic and perhaps a bigot. . . . And do you believe it's because you're making this movie about Jesus." Replied Gibson, "I think it is, yes. I think he's been sent."

[6] Months later, in the second of what has thus far been three pieces on Gibson and his film, the *New York Times*' Frank Rich charged Gibson with ginning up hostility to his project when none was there. But in fact there *was* a writer doing the things that Gibson charged, if not in the ominous spirit portrayed. He was Christopher Noxon, a Los Angeles freelance writer who had pitched the story to the *New York Times* (having being turned down by *Vanity Fair*) after hearing about the church Gibson built in the hills above Malibu.

[7] Here is how Noxon explained how he came to write the story in an email he sent to me a few days ago.

Two years ago, my dad noticed surveyor stakes on a hill near his home in Agoura Hills. Along with other neighbors active in a local homeowners group, he met with a church leader, who explained that it was a traditionalist congregation and that services would be conducted entirely in Latin. The \$2.8 million construction was being picked up by a single congregant, who he described as "a very spiritual figure on the world stage."

Gibson's involvement was an interesting celebrity tidbit, but it wasn't anything I felt particularly compelled to write about. Mr. Gibson's longtime marriage, seven children and conservatism are well known in Hollywood, and while it didn't sound like his congregation was practicing garden-variety Catholicism, I certainly didn't have any interest in poking around a guy's church just because he's famous.

But over the next few months, other signs that something serious was going on with Gibson convinced me the story was worth pursuing. First came news of "The Passion," which in addition to representing a huge commercial and artistic risk, is also an open effort to evangelize. Then, poking around on the Internet, I learned about his father, his books and the Alliance for Catholic Tradition. I went to

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parochial school myself but never knew anything about the traditionalist movement - it was fascinating stuff, and with Mr. Gibson's involvement I knew there was a story to be told. . . .

It's important to note that while I did have a family connection to the story, my father didn't oppose Mr. Gibson's church. After reviewing the plans and coming to an agreement covering such issues as parking, signage and hours of operation, his neighborhood group gave the project their stamp of approval. By all accounts, that review was a routine process and the relationship between the church and the neighbors was entirely amicable. Mr. Gibson's lawyer Martin Singer has subsequently threatened to take action against me, the *Times* and even my father and his neighbors, on the grounds that my piece was an act of retribution linked to a land dispute. This is nonsense, and easily confirmed as such.

[8] Gibson himself declined to be interviewed for the article, so perhaps it was not surprising that Noxon should focus attention on the 85-year-old Hutton Gibson, a leading figure in the traditionalist movement - and a newlywed - who (according to the article) was more than happy to welcome the young journalist into his Houston home and treat him to a full dose of sedevacantism (the belief that the current pope is illegitimate, and therefore that the See of Peter is "vacant"), to say nothing of anti-Semitism. While making it clear that Mel Gibson did not necessarily share all his father's views, Noxon did suggest that he was no fan of the Vatican, having been quoted in the Italian newspaper *Il Giorno* as attacking the Vatican as a "wolf in sheep's clothing." If it was not a flagrantly hostile piece, it can hardly be considered the kind of advance notice that a producer-director would want for his \$25 million high-risk exercise in religious filmmaking.

[9] Shortly before the article appeared, Rabbi Marvin Hier, dean and founder of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, having apparently seen a copy of the article, gave an interview to Reuters expressing concern about the forthcoming movie. "Obviously, no one has seen 'The Passion' and I certainly have no problem with Mel Gibson's right to believe as he sees fit or make any movie he wants to," Hier said. "What concerns me, however is when I read that the film's purpose is to undo the changes made by Vatican II. . . . If the new film seeks to undo Vatican II . . . it would unleash more of the scurrilous charges of deicide directed against the Jewish people, which took the Catholic Church 20 centuries to finally repudiate."

[10] Mel Gibson's response was to drum up support among those on the conservative end of the media spectrum. On March 6, three days before the *Times* article appeared, a Q.-and-A. interview with Gibson appeared in *Zenit*, an international news service owned by the Legion of Christ. The Legion is an order of priests founded in the middle of the twentieth century by a Mexican priest named Marcial Maciel that can be characterized as somewhat to the right of Opus Dei. For over a year, *Zenit* has been a regular source of pro-Gibson news and commentary. Asked in its March 10 interview how he could be so sure that his film was accurate, Gibson replied, "We've done the research. I'm telling the story as the Bible tells it. I think the story, as it really happened, speaks for itself. The Gospel is a complete script, and that's what we're filming."

[11] On March 7, the *Wall Street Journal* ran a puff piece from Rome on the shooting of the film by the news director of EWTN, Mother Angelica's Eternal Word Television Network, which bills itself as the world's largest religious TV network. The article's final paragraph read: "'I look at myself as a conduit here - a tool, using what God gave me,' Mr. Gibson says. For those who still doubt the power of faith and the merits of sacrifice, one has only to peek into Studio 5 to see them in bold, passionate flower."

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[12] The Zenit interview, on March 10, was picked up by NewsMax.com. NewsMax is run by Christopher Ruddy, one of the cadre of right-wing journalists who made a name for themselves by assailing President Clinton. (Ruddy's notable contribution in this effort was the 1997 book, *The Strange Death of Vincent Foster*.) Advertising itself as "America's News Page," NewsMax features an array of punditry from the Limbaugh wing of the Republican party. It was and remains a principal source of pro-Gibson news and commentary. On March 11, for example, it took up cudgels against Rabbi Hier. A March 26 column by Phil Brennan was headed "Crucifying Mel Gibson."

[13] To sum up, as of last March, the media forces arrayed in regard to Gibson's *Passion* were, on one side, Noxon's *New York Times Magazine* article and Rabbi Hier, and, on the other, a clutch of conservative Gibson defenders on TV, in print, and on-line. And then onto the field marched a collection of academics - the notorious scholars' committee assembled by Eugene Fisher of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, or USCCB.

Enter the Committee of Scholars

[14] I do not propose to recount every twist to this chapter of the story. A detailed and, so far as I can tell, accurate chronology by Paula Fredriksen, a member of the committee, appears in a long article she wrote for the *New Republic* last summer. Briefly, however, Fisher, who is the USCCB staff member responsible for Catholic-Jewish relations, was led by Noxon's article to suggest to Gibson's production company, Icon, that it might be useful for a group of Catholic and Jewish scholars to review the script of the film. No response was forthcoming; however, a copy of the script fell into the hands of Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, who runs an education center at the Chicago Jewish Federation. Poupko took it to Father Pawlikowski, with whom he had been engaged in interfaith discussions. (I should say that I confirmed this with Father Pawlikowski, not with Rabbi Poupko, who declined to discuss the matter with me.)

[15] In any event, Pawlikowski sends it to Fisher, who proceeds to inform Icon that a script has fallen into his hands and that the scholars will be reviewing it. It is in their hands by Easter Sunday, April 20. On April 22, the *Los Angeles Times* publishes a story headlined "Scholars concerned about film's fallout," which quotes two members of the committee, Sister Mary Boys of the Union Theological Seminary in New York and Eugene Korn, then director of Interfaith Affairs at the Anti-Defamation League. Both express worries about how the film will portray the Passion. Neither indicates that they have seen the script; indeed Korn is quoted as saying he would wait "a suitable amount of time" for Gibson "to respond to the request for a panel of scholars to read the script." It seems clear that the interviews took place before the script turned up.

[16] While I have not been able to speak with Fisher - who has been mum on the controversy - multiple sources have confirmed that an extended phone conversation subsequently took place between him and Gibson himself. While Gibson cannot have been happy at the *Los Angeles Times* story - my understanding is that he was quite upset - he nonetheless was fully aware that the scholars had the script in hand and would submit a private report to Icon on their reactions to it. This was in fact done in the middle of May, and after a couple of weeks of silence the result was a demand from Icon that the script, now identified as stolen, be returned and an apology tendered under threat of lawsuits against both the USCCB and the ADL. The ADL ignored the threat, but the USCCB responded by returning the copies of the script and tendering a species of apology. I can report with some confidence that the USCCB did not believe that the threatened lawsuit was anything to worry about. The issue seems to have been, rather, that the report, sent with a letter on USCCB letterhead, had not been authorized by any committee of bishops of the USCCB. The apology made that clear,

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and put off until the actual appearance of the movie a judgment on its merits by USCCB. I cannot wait for that.

[17] As is now well known, the scholars' committee was very critical of the script. News of their 18-page report first emerged in a May 30 Zenit story that displayed considerable familiarity with its contents. Although the Gibson people have claimed that it was the scholars who leaked the report, they seem to me simply to have been blowing smoke. The scholars would hardly have gone to Zenit as their preferred media outlet.

[18] The impression at the USCCB was that the Gibson people were spoiling for a public fight. Of course, one may ask, who exactly *is* the USCCB? Like any other complex institution, it is comprised of people of differing views and perspectives, and includes bishops who can be counted among Gibson's defenders. The May 30 Zenit story, in fact, begins by mentioning a defense of Gibson by Denver archbishop Charles Chaput, who in his weekly column in the May 28 issue of his archdiocesan newspaper attacked those he called "some critics and scholars," writing, "the criticism seems based on an earlier, working draft of the script that Gibson says was stolen and leaked; in other words, an inaccurate text that was acquired - to put it politely - by unauthorized means." Chaput allowed that he had not seen the film or read "the final script," but he was one of those who was shown a version of the film in mid-June, and he has consistently been the film's strongest supporter among American bishops. Indeed, in his current (January 28) newspaper column, he urges his flock to purchase tickets for a special advance screening February 28; the archdiocese's home web page features a display ad for the special screening, saying that proceeds will "benefit our archdiocesan seminaries and formation programs."

[19] As a result, in short, you have the work of an ad hoc committee of academics assembled by the staff of the USCCB under attack by a prominent archbishop. Is it entirely surprising that the USCCB did not march into a conflict with Gibson and company? The effect, however, was to give the impression that the scholars' committee was some kind of disreputable and underhanded venture whose conclusions the USCCB rejected. For their part Gibson and company did what they could to exaggerate the extent of the USCCB's apology - to the point where they were warned to cease and desist, which they did, but by then the damage was done.

[20] My own feeling is that the USCCB treated the scholars pretty shabbily. And I told the bishops' Communications Committee this January 13 at a panel on religion reporting that I was invited to participate in:

Not to put too fine a point on it, but the impression was left out there that your own folks had purloined a copy of the script, that their report was not something that Gibson and his people were waiting for with anticipation, and that the scholars' committee was operating on behalf of some far-out liberal agenda. All of this was untrue, and was known around here to be untrue. I think it's unfortunate that folks acting in good faith under the Church's auspices to promote an honest understanding of the Passion story were hung out to dry. More important from the standpoint of what brings us here today, a fair and accurate public understanding of the controversy over the film was impaired by what emanated - and by what failed to emanate - from the USCCB.

The session was off the record, but since then the USCCB has asked for a copy of my remarks to give to the Catholic News Service (CNS), so I am assuming that I am violating no trust by repeating them here. Indeed, and this may say something about the complex nature of the Church, I must

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assume that there are those in the USCCB, perhaps even bishops, who would want CNS to publish the remarks.

Conclusion

[21] Let me move towards a conclusion by saying that Gibson appears to have been doing what Hollywood producers always try to do: get as much positive buzz as possible about his film before the public. What's different here, of course, is that the people he has gone to for such buzz have not been the usual collection of flacks and blurb-meisters but some of the most ideologically engaged media folks in the country. Last summer he began showing cuts of the film to friendly columnists and religious leaders, the majority of them, so far as I can tell, not Catholic. The result, of course, was friendly press. Although he has been insistent that he works with and socializes with Jews, and that there is nothing anti-Semitic about the film, he declined to show the film to any but the most ideologically friendly Jews - people like Rabbi Daniel Lapin and movie critic Michael Medved. Perhaps in this whole story nothing has been more intentionally manipulative than the agreements put before the early viewers. As ADL national director Abraham Foxman, who recently snuck into a showing for evangelical ministers in Orlando, reported to the *New York Times* January 23, viewers were asked to sign a pledge agreeing to keep confidential their "exposure, knowledge and opinions of the film" while at the same time adding that "pastors and church leaders are free to speak out in support of the movie and your opinions resulting from today's exposure to this project and its producer."

[22] The effect of Gibson's campaign has been to whip up a new front in the ongoing and episodic culture war. And, I have to say, it is a rather ugly front. There have been tiffs before between Jewish organizations - the ADL in particular - and parts of the Christian Right - Pat Robertson in particular. But never, to my knowledge, has there been a fight over the Easter story.

[23] Of course, the apotheosis of the publicity effort has been the successful effort by the Gibson folks to get a copy of *The Passion of the Christ* into the pope's own DVD player. I will not rehearse the story of claims and counter-claims, which I suspect all of you have followed. I would only point out that the pope's secretary's denial that the pope had made any remark about the film sent this story into a media Twilight Zone.

[24] "Here's what I think," declared Rod Dreher, a conservative columnist on the *Dallas Morning News*. "The pope was quoted accurately, but, for some reason, Vatican officials became uncomfortable with it. So they changed their official story. If doing so makes honorable filmmakers and journalists, Catholics among, come off as sleazebags or dupes - well, that's life."

[25] John Allen of the *National Catholic Reporter*, writing in NCROnline January 23, declared, "Reporters, myself certainly included, look like naifs who have been spun every which way, or worse yet, like willing partners in someone's dishonesty." Allen went on to say of the Vatican, "Even if officials were acting for the noblest of motives, they have stretched the meaning of words, on and off the record, to their breaking point. Aside from the obvious moralism that it is wrong to deceive, such confusion can only enhance perceptions that the aging John Paul II is incapable of controlling his own staff, that 'no one is in charge' and the church is adrift."

[26] My own sense of what happened in the Vatican was that it suddenly dawned on some of the pope's courtiers that if a serious denial was not issued the planet was going to be inundated with DVDs - not to mention posters and TV commercials - featuring the testimonial, "It is as it was - Pope John Paul II." And if there is anything papal functionaries do not like, it is the use of the pope's name for commercial gain. At the same time, one is tempted to conclude that Gibson himself

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has not been all that upset about the fracas. Not only has it been boffo for business, but also it reflects badly on that “wolf in sheep’s clothing” he has talked about. Some wolf.

[27] If, to wrap up, I can be permitted a personal hypothesis, I would say that, beyond whatever pure spiritual and artistic goals he may have, and beyond getting people to see his movie and recouping his investment, Gibson should be seen as having an ecclesiastical agenda to bring the Church back to a traditionalist understanding of what it was before Vatican II. This has necessarily involved some complicated political moves, and in particular it has meant working with conservative individuals and organizations inside or closely associated with the Church. *The Passion of the Christ* has been so far served as a marvelous tool, though how effective it will ultimately prove to be is anyone’s guess. But as I have followed the twists and turns in the showing of the film - the versions with certain provocative scenes included and the versions with those scenes excluded - it has occurred to me that there will never be a single, final version of Gibson’s version of the last 12 hours of the life of Jesus. In the contemporary manner, with DVDs of many movies now comprising new director’s cuts, and including racy scenes apparently left on the cutting room floor in order to secure an R rating, *The Passion of the Christ* will go out into the world in different forms: a multiplex version for the general public, a “blood curse” version for anti-Semites, and perhaps other versions as well. Who knows, there may even be a Vatican II version - but I seriously doubt it.