

## Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*

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### Sectarian Catholicism and Mel Gibson

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#### Introduction

[1] The title of this presentation incorporates both the task assigned to me in this symposium and the content of my presentation. Mel Gibson is a self-confessed traditionalist Catholic, and the task assigned to me is to explain that contemporary traditionalist Catholicism. That explanation is the direct focus of this paper. To the extent that Gibson is a well-known traditionalist, and the son of an even better known traditionalist with bizarre and well-documented views, understanding traditionalism contributes indirectly to understanding Mel Gibson. Neither of those two understandings will permit me to make any judgment about Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*, which I have not seen, but they do raise and have raised questions about the film that would be very serious if verified. I will acknowledge those questions as I proceed.

[2] Instead of speaking of traditionalist Catholicism I speak of sectarian Catholicism, because traditionalist Catholicism exhibits all the characteristics of a sect, a religious body that has separated itself from a larger religious institution. The sect's separation from the larger religious institution is accompanied by claims of moral and/or doctrinal purity, of true religion abandoned by the larger institution, and of self as the true religion in opposition to the mainline institution. The exclusivity of sectarians in general and, in this case, of Catholic sectarians in particular leads them to eschew dialogue of every kind, including ecumenical dialogue (see Wach: 196-205). One is either a member of the sect and, therefore, saved or not a member and, therefore, not saved.

[3] Contemporary Catholic sectarianism is a small, global movement that arose after the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, largely in response to the Council's embrace of a renewed vision of

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Church, which softens the monarchical papacy Gibson cherished in his youth and continues to cherish, a new theological idea of religious liberty previously unheard of in Catholic circles, and previously-disdained ecumenical dialogue with other Christian and non-Christian religions. The movement crystallized in 1971 with the prohibition of the Latin Mass authorized by and in use since the sixteenth-century Council of Trent. Though the movement is diverse, its flagship became the Society of St. Pius X, a priestly fraternity founded in 1971 by dissident French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, who was eventually excommunicated by Pope John Paul II for consecrating bishops to ensure the continuation of his society. I do not believe it is politically insignificant that the present Vatican official charged with bringing traditionalist dissidents back into the Roman fold, Cardinal Castrillon Hoyos, Prefect of the Congregation of the Clergy, is the same official who, after viewing a rough cut of *The Passion*, declared to conservative Catholic Zenit News on September 18, 2003, that it was “a triumph of art and faith” that would bring people “closer to God” (cited from Dinges: 17). As frequently happens with Vatican statements to the press, a barrage of negative comments about the film has led to more mature consideration and more restrained and muted comments.

[4] It is very difficult to assess the number of Catholic traditionalists around the world or in the United States. Christopher Noxon’s *New York Times Magazine* (March 9, 2003) article estimated the number in the United States at 100,000, but extrapolating from my personal knowledge of a number of Traditionalist groups, I believe that number to be inflated. The real number may be closer to half that, though their financial support, as in Gibson’s case, provides them a voice well beyond their numbers. It is also a mistake to assume that all traditionalists are the same and their concerns are the same. They are a broad, ideologically-divided group, loosely united in their repudiation of the *aggiornamento* Pope John XXIII set as an objective for his Council. The most radicalized of the Traditionalist group are so incensed by John XXIII and what they perceive as the Council’s betrayal of true (by which, unwittingly, they mean Tridentine) Catholicism that they adhere to a bizarre doctrine of *sede-vacantism*, which means literally the Chair [of Peter] is vacant and embodies the ludicrous doctrine that all the Popes since Pius XII have been false Popes. It is not clear that Mel Gibson adheres to *sede-vacantism*, though he does repudiate Vatican II, but it is clear by self-confession that his father does, and the temptation to visit the sins of the father on the son is powerful. For the sake of justice, of course, that temptation should be resisted, a restraint from which the press has absolved itself in the present debate.

### **Sectarian Theology**

[5] How should we characterize the Tridentine theology that Traditionalists espouse? The Council of Trent, the Catholic response to the teachings of the Reformers, specifically those of Martin Luther, was charged to consider two things: Catholic dogma and needed reform. The Council adhered scrupulously to this charge, which meant that it did not produce a general systematic consideration of Catholic theology but only specific treatment of those things that the Reformers had challenged. The Council was “a more or less valid and effective reply to Lutheran and Calvinist questions and challenges. But [history] has also recognized that in the course of the following four centuries a too rigid desire to stick to the letter of the Council has sometimes blocked the progress which ought to have taken place within the structures of the Church, in response to new challenges and questions” (Ganoczy: 75). Since the Reformers had not challenged it, Trent produced no systematic ecclesiology. Its insistence on the essentially hierarchical nature of ministry, however, in the sense that ministry is something done only by clerics, produced in the following four centuries a matching insistence on the essentially hierarchical nature of Church. It was within this exclusively hierarchical view of Church that pre-Vatican II Catholics lived out their lives; it was this hierarchical view that

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the Second Vatican Council roundly rejected; and it is to this hierarchical view that Catholic traditionalists currently adhere.

[6] A core doctrine of this hierarchical model of Church is the doctrine that the Roman Catholic Church is the one, true Church established by Jesus Christ on the foundation of Peter the Rock. As Pius XII taught in his encyclical letter *Mystici Corporis*, written by Jesuit Father Sebastian Tromp, Professor of Fundamental Theology at Rome's Gregorian University (1943), and had to repeat again in his encyclical *Humani Generis* (1950) because so many Catholic theologians disputed the teaching, the Body of Christ is identical to the historical Roman Catholic Church. An obvious corollary of that doctrine, to which a majority of Catholic theologians at the time could not subscribe, was that non-Catholic Christians, even though they might be in the state of grace, could not be considered members of Christ's Body and, therefore, could not be saved. That doctrine was embedded in an ancient Roman claim: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, no salvation outside the Church. In 1947, Jesuit Father Leonard Feeney interpreted that aphorism in such a rigid sense that he was excommunicated by Pius XII. Gibson apparently shares Feeney's reading of the text, maybe even against his own better judgment.

[7] On being asked by Peter Boyer, interviewing him for a *New Yorker* article, whether being a Protestant disqualified him [Boyer] from salvation, Gibson responded simply: "there is no salvation outside the Church." He then went on to talk about his non-Catholic wife. "My wife is a saint. She's a much better person than I am. She's Episcopalian, Church of England. She prays, she believes in God, she knows Jesus, she believes in that stuff. And it's just not fair if she doesn't make it, she's better than I am. But that [outside the Church there is no salvation] is a pronouncement from the Chair. I go with it" (Boyer: 71). Things could not be more clearly articulated – both Gibson's going with the Chair and his innate discomfort with the Chair's teaching, maybe even with God, if his wife is not saved. It is too bad that he rejects the Second Vatican Council, for it rejected Pius XII's identification of the Body of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church (see *Lumen Gentium*, 8) and taught clearly for the first time in Catholic history that many of the significant elements and endowments which "build and give life to the Church itself can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope, and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit." And all of these "are capable of giving access to that communion in which is salvation" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3). Traditionalist Catholics believe only Catholics go to heaven (without every considering where that leaves Jesus the Jew); the contemporary Catholic Church believes, on the basis of what it considers the revelation of God, that God saves whom God saves. It is here that the core of the opposition to Gibson's film is founded.

### Scripture and Mel Gibson

[8] Another important corollary of the doctrine that the Roman Catholic Church is the one, true Church of Christ relates to sacred scripture and its interpretation, and is at the heart of both Gibson's project and the reaction to it. In the traditionalist doctrine, only the Catholic Church is authorized and equipped to interpret the true meaning of the biblical word of God, and that word of God is to be interpreted *vi verborum*, according to the words, that is, literally. That claim was jealously and assiduously protected against all competing claims in the post-Reformation ages, not least by the Tridentine declaration that the only version of the Bible that was "authentic" was the ancient Latin Vulgate, that this Vulgate was the only text to be used "in public lectures, disputes, preaching, and exposition," and that "no one, under any pretext, was to presume or dare to reject that version" (*Decretum de Vulgata Editione Bibliorum et de Modo Interpretandi Sacram Scripturam*, 1506). Nor was anyone to hold an interpretation of scripture contrary to that held by the Church, "whose task it was to

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judge the true meaning and interpretation of sacred scripture” (*Decretum de Vulgata Editione Bibliorum et de Modo Interpretandi Sacram Scripturam*, 1507). All of that was irrevocably changed, beginning in the pontificate of Pius XII and culminating in the promulgation of the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, in November 1965. Gibson, of course, rejects the Council as a betrayal of true Catholicism and, therefore, pays no attention to its instructions. He reads the Bible literalistically, and that is what has some Catholic scholars anxious.

[9] The Pontifical Biblical Commission articulates the contemporary Catholic approach to reading the scriptures. “The historical-critical method is the indispensable method for the scientific study of the meaning of ancient texts. Holy scripture, inasmuch as it is the ‘word of God in human language,’ has been composed by human authors in all its various parts and in all the sources that lie behind them. Because of this, its proper understanding not only admits the use of this method but actually requires it” (500). This simply codifies what the Council had said in *Dei Verbum*: “Seeing that in sacred scripture, God speaks through human beings in human fashion, it follows that the interpreters of sacred scripture, if they are to ascertain what God has wished to communicate to us, should carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind, that meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of their words” (12).

[10] To attain the meaning God intended in a scriptural text, the interpreter must utilize all the tools available for getting at the meaning which “the sacred writers, in given situations and granted the circumstances of their time and culture, intended to express and did in fact express, through the medium of a contemporary literary form” (*Dei Verbum*, 12). The meaning of scripture, the Biblical Commission insists, is embedded in the “literal sense . . . expressed directly by the inspired human authors” (512). This literal sense is not to be confused with the literalist sense beloved of all biblical fundamentalists, including Catholic Traditionalists and Mel Gibson. It is his Traditionalist, literalist reading of the passion narratives that has some Catholic scholars anxious about his film. They know not only that a literalist approach to the texts is not the contemporary Catholic approach that distances Jews in general from culpability in the charge of deicide but also that similar literalist passion plays have fueled Christian animosity and violence towards Jews in the past. The same knowledge has raised the guard also of Jewish scholars and the Anti Defamation League.

[11] Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the charge of deicide against Jews was taken as proven in Catholic circles. The liturgical celebration of Good Friday, the ritual memorial of Jesus’ passion and death, included prayers for “the perfidious Jews.” The Council banished such prayers, and the mindset that underpinned them, with the publication of its Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. “Even though the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Jesus,” it decreed, “neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time nor Jews today can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion” (*Nostra Aetate*, 4). There follows an instruction. “Consequently all must take care, lest in catechizing or preaching the word of God, they teach anything which is not in accord with the truth of the gospel message or the spirit of Christ” (*Nostra Aetate*, 4). That instruction could have been written specifically for Mel Gibson and the fear is that, ignoring the Vatican Council in general, he has ignored this important ecumenical instruction in particular. Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League calls attention to the dangers of a literalist interpretation. Mel Gibson is not necessarily anti-Semitic, Foxman judges, but he is most definitely “insensitive.” The real problem is that any visual presentation of a literalist reading of the passion narratives can overwhelm, and all the reports suggest that Gibson’s passion play is emotionally overwhelmingly overwhelming. Reports of people crying during a viewing are common. What bothers Foxman, and correctly, is that in that overwhelmed state any message of love can be twisted into something hateful. The film can, beyond

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any intention of the filmmaker, “fuel, trigger, stimulate, induce, rationalize, legitimize anti-Semitism” (cited in Boyer: 71).

[12] Another issue fueling both Catholic and Jewish concern about the visual presentation of Jesus passion and death in Gibson’s movie is that he is drawing his image-information not only from the passion narratives in the gospels but also from the visions of a nineteenth-century Augustinian nun, Anna Catherina Emmerich. Emmerich, a Westphalian farm girl, began to have visions at an early age and eventually, after making vows as an Augustinian nun, developed the stigmata. Her experiences, as always, attracted the attention not only of Church authorities but also of the curious. In Emmerich’s case, among the curious was the romantic poet, Clemens Brentano, who wrote down her visions of Jesus sufferings and, after her death in 1824, published them in a book under the title of *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (republished in Schmoeger). Gibson acquired the book as part of a lot sale when a Catholic convent closed down and is on record as stating that Emmerich’s images are amazing. “She supplied me with stuff I never would have thought of” (Boyer: 71). She also supplied him with stuff that is not in the gospel narratives and has no claim, therefore, to inspiration or authenticity. It may be particularly “insensitive,” in Foxman’s word, to use those images to tell the story he wishes to tell, namely, the passion of Jesus as told by the gospel narratives. There are some who are mightily concerned that the vividness of Emmerich’s imaginative representations, for instance, of the scourging of Jesus, could do much more than the gospel images to stimulate, fuel, or legitimate violent anti-Semitism. Gibson’s response to that concern might increase, rather than salve, it. “Modern secular Judaism wants to blame the Holocaust on the Catholic Church,” he says. “And it’s a lie. It’s revisionism. And they have been working on that one for a long time” (Boyer: 71). Bizarre notions, along with bizarre behavior, are part and parcel of every exclusive sect. Nothing bonds a group together more efficiently than a perceived common enemy.

### **Conclusion**

[13] In summary, then, what can be said about sectarian Catholicism, Mel Gibson, and *The Passion of the Christ*? Sectarian Catholicism is rooted in the sixteenth-century Council of Trent and rejects absolutely the twentieth-century Second Vatican Council as an unwarranted betrayal of that root. It is an exclusive sect, blessing its members with the promise of salvation, cursing non-members with the promise of damnation. The sect regards itself as the remnant of the one, true, Catholic Church established by Jesus on Peter the Rock, whose Roman *sedia* has been vacant since the death of Pius XII. That one true Church has complete control over the sacred scriptures, to the extent that it and it alone can declare which version of the biblical text is inspired and which is not inspired and that it and it alone can asserting the indubitable meaning of any biblical text. As a self-confessed and publicly active traditionalist Catholic, Mel Gibson must share these beliefs, which are not now Catholic beliefs. Have his beliefs affected his visual passion play? It is difficult to see how they could not affect it and, at least, fears have been raised that they truly have had an effect on his images. Whether they have, in fact, must be a future judgment when we see which of the many cuts of the film is finally released for public and critical viewing.

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