



The Jesus Question

By William A. Borst, Ph.D.

To live in a society that thrives on religious cynicism requires great personal faith. Christ's birth over 2000 years ago has confronted mankind with an inescapable question: *Who was this man and what does He mean to me?* The life of Christ has forced people to deal with the meaning of life, the nature of good, evil, and sin in their lives.

Over the course of its long history, the Catholic Church has provided an unflinching and consistent answer to this question. Jesus was the Son of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, who suffered and died for the sins of all humans. His death and Resurrection stand as the central tenet of a faith that has endured centuries of bloody religious wars, acrimonious debate, the Enlightenment, and violent revolutions. As the true Messiah, Jesus was the only religious leader whose coming had been prophesied centuries before His birth. This is the great mystery that the Catholic Church has obediently protected, defended, and preserved throughout its history.

Just a Man

Jesus often spoke in simple parables, telling His followers what they must do or what they should believe without any lengthy theological discourse. The rest has been left for popes, bishops, councils, theologians, and the faithful to decipher.

The Church's interpretation has been difficult for many to accept. Christ's Incarnation especially presented some early problems for Church leaders. Attempts to explain Jesus' Divinity and His relationship with the Father ran the risk of devaluing His humanity. The Church feared that Jesus would be relegated to the role of a mere aspect of God. In the early fourth century that fear became a reality as Arius, a priest from Alexandria, Egypt taught that God had created Jesus at the beginning of time. Arianism promoted the idea that Jesus was God's subordinate. Since only God could redeem, if Jesus were just a man, then there could have been no redemption. Arianism warned that the Church had returned to the paganism of polytheism.

Alexander, the Bishop of Alexandria, wanted to excommunicate Arius, a tall, lean man, with downcast eyes and the disposition of a stoic. Fearing a schism within the Church, the Emperor Constantine called the Council of Nicea in 325, the first world council. The Council confirmed Jesus to be consubstantial with God the Father. Arius was excommunicated and sent into exile. Despite its condemnation, Arianism is one of the most widespread and divisive Christian heresies, which still resonates in such plays as *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, where Jesus was a good man but still *just a man*.

Jesus' Neighborhood

In 1804 President Thomas Jefferson sat in the White House and clipped verses out of two Bibles, pasting them in an abbreviated version of the New Testament that eliminated all reference to Jesus' Divinity. Jefferson's new Bible portrayed Jesus as the rational ethicist that so many moderns have grown to love and accept. He is what the *New York Times* has called a *Mister Rogers Jesus*, a Semitic neighborly man who was easy to love and imitate but asked very little in return.

In modern times, the writings of Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud further negated the need for a Redeemer. Freud laid the basis for a popular school of thought that said that sin and guilt were just inventions of the Catholic Church, which used such ideas to control its millions of faithful members. This Freudian teaching has found a warm reception on many levels of American society, especially its universities and social science organizations. With ideas of universal salvation and sinless human beings, the historical necessity of a Redeemer has been made moot. A thoroughly human Jesus respected for his unconditional promises of love, forgiveness, and peace is a far more palpable religious figure. The world wants a Cross-less Jesus, made in its own New Age image. They want a plastic Jesus who will never disturb their serenity with unpleasant images of sin and guilt. The Jesus who shed his blood for the sins of the world does not fit the *City of Man's* spiritual profile.

Hollywood Jesus

There have been many popular movies made about Jesus and the vital questions His life prompted. The story of Jesus has been grist for Hollywood, which has used everyone from Monty Python to Swedish actor Max von Sydow to play Him. Film directors have traditionally sanitized or circumvented the violence of Christ's suffering and death to the extent that the cinematic Jesus appears more abstract than real. Most Jesus movies were high-priced epics that gave lip service to His message without ever dramatizing the meaning of His Incarnation. Jeffrey Hunter and others portrayed Jesus with a robotic presence that substituted distance and aloofness for respect and reverence.

One movie that deviated from the banal *Hollywood Jesus* was Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Scorsese adapted his screenplay from the book of the same name, written by Greek novelist Nikos Kazantzakis. In his introduction, the author made it perfectly clear that he did not rely on the traditional Synoptic Gospels to write his Jesus fantasy. His subliminal text implies that the Gospels carried the virus of Jewish hatred and were to be totally repudiated.

Scorsese's infidelity to the Gospels guaranteed his movie would be a hit with the mainstream media. They lauded it as being broad-minded, creative, and visually stupendous. *The Last Temptation* was an absurd film that presented a Jesus who was not only unmistakably human, but also strangely neurotic. Christians who protested his movie were lectured to be more tolerant of Scorsese's outrageous portrayal. This is in stark contrast to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, which was severely condemned precisely for its fidelity to the Gospel accounts. No critic of *The Passion*, which is the perfect antidote to *The Last Temptation*, has been told to be more tolerant.

The Last Temptation is a bold depiction of Jesus as a carpenter who made the crosses that the Romans used for crucifixions. He is literally slapped around in the opening scene by actor Harvey Keitel, a menacing figure in a short toga who plays Judas Iscariot like a Brooklynese zealot. The film manifests a brooding Jesus, wrestling with his inner demons of anger, hatred, and lust for Mary Magdalene, seductively portrayed by Barbara Hershey. When Jesus finally starts to preach, his words have an illogical spontaneity that muddles his maudlin message of love and forgiveness. As played by accomplished actor Willem Dafoe, Jesus has a giddy smile that betrays more the soul of an adolescent on a roller coaster ride than a divine being on a salvific mission. *The Last Temptation* begs the question, *why would anyone follow this man?* The final nail in Scorsese's blasphemous Jesus is a dream sequence that has Jesus come down from the cross, marry Magdalene, and beget several children.

Mad Mel

With *The Passion of the Christ*, director/actor Mel Gibson entered into the maelstrom of the Jesus question. Gibson is best known for a variety of roles that range from the dystopic *Mad Max* movies, comedies, to his best movies like *The Patriot* and *Braveheart*, which portrayed epic tales of heroic men in defense of human virtues.

One of eleven children, Gibson was born into a strict Catholic household, in Peekskill, New York. A traditionalist Catholic, who still favors the Latin Mass, he is the father of seven children with Robyn, his wife of twenty-four years. His surfeit of money, awards, and popularity as the *Sexiest Man Alive*, left him noticeably empty and unfulfilled. Suffering through his own dark night of the soul, the 48-year old actor credits his Catholic faith with bringing him back from the brink of despair. Gibson sank thirty million dollars of his own money in an effort to bring the *real Jesus* of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to the big screen. The movie is an almost mystical result of his obsessive search for the roots of his nearly lost Catholic faith.

Good Friday Meditation

Some movies entertain. Some teach, while others shock. *The Passion of the Christ* mortifies. The film serves as a penitential act of religious devotion that evenly transcends its graphic horror and visceral queasiness. Befitting its Ash Wednesday national debut in 3000 theaters, *The Passion* portrays cinematic Stations of the Cross that encompass the sorrowful mysteries in a grueling depiction of the last twelve hours of Christ's passion and death. It is perfect for meditation and prayer.

The Passion clearly demarcates the redemptive brutality of Christ's suffering from the standard Hollywood fare of gratuitous violence. Gibson's adroit use of flashbacks acts as a respite from the continuous gore to scenes of family warmth. Jesus' affection for his mother, and her motherly concern when He falls as a child, provided the viewer with a welcomed break from the horror. *The Passion* serves as a vivid reminder that the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is more than a communal celebration of the Last Supper, but stands as a memorial to Christ's bloody death on the Cross.

James Caviezel, best known for his haunting performance in the anti-war genre film *The Thin Red Line*, plays a thoroughly warm and creditable Jesus. His acrobatic contortions, falls, and bloodletting are a disturbing testament to Jesus' extraordinary suffering. The opening scene in the Garden of Gethsemane set the tone for the movie with its startling dramatization of the intense mental agony that afflicted Jesus who fully knew what torment awaited Him. Caviezel is uncanny as he instantaneously transforms from a frightened human Jesus to a fully incarnated Jesus who obediently complies with His Father's will. Making the film was also physically tax-

ing for Caviezel who hung on a cross, barely clothed in frigid temperatures, was struck by lightning and dislocated his shoulder during one of his many falls. While some temperamental actors demand larger dressing rooms or limousine service, Caviezel begged Gibson to have daily Mass because if he were going to play Jesus he needed to receive His Body and Blood.

A Fistful of Nails

The film has not resonated well with a secular public that denies Original sin and the necessity of God's death and Resurrection. *The Passion* has been put under the microscope of media scrutiny that rebels at any notion of sin, suffering or Christian fervor. *Newsweek* called it the *Gospel according to the Marquis de Sade*. The dyspeptic Maureen Dowd of the *New York Times*, alluded to one of Sergio Leone *spaghetti westerns* by calling Gibson's movie *A Fistful of Nails*. Al Neuharth of *USA Today* called *The Passion* an exercise in *bloody sadomasochism*.

Gibson's hypocritical critics have ordinarily had no complaint with candor being portrayed on the screen as long as it was feminine flesh or blasphemous language. It is ironic that many filmmakers can depict every conceivable vice and degradation known to man, yet are upset by a movie that attempts to transcend violence and brutality into something holy and redemptive. It is strangely revealing that the graphic violence of Jesus' bloody crucifixion could inflame their artistic sensibilities, since these are the same folks who have thrived on bloody gore and human mutilation in films, such as *Natural Born Killers* and the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Many of these critics are the same people who applaud films that promote abortion, sodomy, pornography, and the elimination of religious influences from the public marketplace. No one ever charged John Irving with promoting his own enlightened agenda for his critically-acclaimed, *Cider House Rules*, which was little more than an agitprop piece for Planned Parenthood.

The Blood Libel

Some secular groups have tried to link *The Passion* with charges of anti-Semitism. Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) shrouded *The Passion* with the insolent assertion that the movie had the potential for exploiting the ubiquitous forces of anti-Semitism. Others predict that the film will undermine the already tenuous relationship that John Paul II has labored to establish between Catholics and Jews over the course of his papacy. Other dissidents even dragged John Paul II into the furor. A controversy arose over whether he actually said *it is as it was*.

Much of the ADL's complaint centered on the movie's sole reference to Matthew 27:25, the so-called *blood libel*, which states *His blood be on our children and us*. The verse occurs just after Pilate had cravenly washed his hands of Jesus' blood, handing Him over to

the Jews to be crucified. As a concession to Foxman, Gibson deleted that subtitle from the movie, though it is still intelligible to those who understand Aramaic.

The Passion is not about the Jews or the Romans. As Jewish film critic Michael Medved said succinctly, *some of the bad guys are Jews. Some of the bad guys are Romans. All of the good guys are Jews*. It is about Jesus and his heroic acts of redemptive suffering. The real focal point of the controversy is not with Gibson or his movie but with the Gospels, as reflective of Jesus' salvific mission of redemptive suffering.

Mel at the Pillar

Even the mention of the term *blacklist* evokes a Pavlovian response of fear and loathing in Hollywood. This has not stopped the rumor mills from repeating threats of putting Gibson on its *Need Not Apply* list. Hollywood wants its directors to stick to the blasphemous, anti-God motif that has dominated their productions the last thirty years. He now understands what Jesus meant when he said *the world will hate you the way it hated Me*. Gibson has suffered his own public scourging at the hands of his critics.

Others have personally assailed Gibson for using *The Passion* as therapy for his dark Manichean vision of earthly life. They have attempted to link his movie with the controversial religious and political views of his elderly father, Hutton. A devoted and loving son, Mel Gibson told Dianne Sawyer on *Primetime Live*, to "*Leave it alone!*"

It is refreshing to see a prominent Catholic stand up for his faith and willingly take the heat that its truth generates. Gibson has brought to the big screen a lasting work of art and faith that has engendered serious thought in audiences of all religious faiths. The movie is a spiritual encounter, which has affected everyone who has seen it. Gibson has given the world his answer to the *Jesus Question*. Everyone can learn from it.

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Special recognition was given to the past recipients of the Motherhood Award and the Freedom Award who wore badges of honor. Also, unique recognition was given to several individuals who have attended each of the 20 Conferences!

The 2004 Motherhood Awardee was Karen Elizabeth Garnett and Carlos Fonts received the 2004 Freedom Award, both most deserving and responsive to Cardinal Mindszenty's principles and example.



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Freedom Awardee Carlos Fonts and Hon. Chrm. Susan Stanzel.



Pres. Eleanor Schlafly, Motherhood Awardee Karen Elizabeth Garnett and Hon. Chrm. Susan Stanzel.