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A "Passion" for Dialogue

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A passion for dialogue

A recent film offers a unique dialogue opportunity

BY AMY UELMEN

As I walked into an opening-day showing of The Passion of the Christ with my Jewish colleague, he looked at the smudge of ash on my forehead and said, “I feel a little funny—this is a sacred day for you, and this is your sacred story.” I did not respond immediately—but my principal reason for seeing the film was concern about the reports of its anti-Semitic undertones. I was there to hear what he thought, and if it turned out to be painful, I wanted to be able to understand that better.

During the film I leaned over a few times to fill in a few of what I knew would be gaps in narrative for someone not familiar with Gospel texts; and he was able to point out those places where the English subtitles did not exactly correspond to the spoken Aramaic.

But most of the time I found he was right—I was completely taken in by “my sacred story.” Very familiar with Gospel texts, the brief flashbacks were enough for me to make a meaningful connection between Jesus’ life and teachings and his culminating passion. Familiar also with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as a profound unity between three persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, for me the images of Satan—especially the penetrating question in the opening garden scene, “Who are you?” and in the midst of the scourging, showing to Jesus a hideous, aged baby—captured well what I imagine to be the psychological and theological depths of Jesus’ internal anguish as he experienced through the Passion that something was terribly wrong in his relationship with the Father. So focused on the person of Jesus, the center of my life of faith, I did not come away from the film with a sense that it would be inflammatory.

The play of the Jewish leadership could have been much more sensitive. He mused, for example, that the almost animal portrayal of Barabbas considerably downplayed the complex political tensions of the time.

In light of his observations and concerns, I began to note the ways in which Gibson’s particular meld of the Gospel texts may have heightened the sense that Jesus was condemned by a monolithic Jewish community. Having participated in many a Good Friday liturgy, I was surprised that both “Give us Barabbas” and “Crucify him” were put first in the mouth of the High Priest, and only then taken up by the crowd. Similarly, in failing to develop the figure of Nicodemus, Gibson missed an opportunity to add considerable nuance to the trial scenes.

Then as I shared more about what I had experienced during the film, our conversation gravitated towards its artistic and psychological power—even across lines of faith experience. We had cried in pretty much the same places; and as he put it, with deep respect: “I knew that Jesus had died, but that he suffered...”

The evening after the film opened, New York’s Center for Jewish History Jews & Justice lecture series sponsored a panel discussion during which Biblical scholar Paula Fredrickson perceptively critiqued that because the plot and character development are so weak, viewers end up filling in many of the blanks themselves. Perhaps this is why Christians and Jews may have dramatically different reactions to the film.

“Perhaps the first step in making sure that the film does not breed further anti-Semitism is to understand why Christians and Jews may have such different experiences when they see the film.”
Gibson's *Passion* may be something of a Rorschach ink blot test in which what one recounts about the film tells more about how one filled in the blanks with one's own faith experience, or in the case of non-Christians, with one's personal understanding and contact with Christian communities or Christian narratives of the Passion.

This is not to say that there is nothing objective in the film to evaluate, or that Gibson did not make deliberate choices about how Jews were portrayed through the dialogue, costumes, and so on. Certain discussions about the film could be a constructive occasion to probe an artist's responsibility to the community, especially in depicting the Passion, or any story which has incited violence against a particular group or people. And certainly there would be plenty of room to critique the extent to which the film's unrelenting and graphic focus on the violence of the Passion ultimately fails to communicate enough about the life and person of Jesus to put it all in meaningful context.

But perhaps the first step in making sure that the film does not breed further anti-Semitism or increased tension between the Christian and the Jewish communities, is to understand why Christians and Jews may have such different experiences when they see the film. If one is inclined to see it, perhaps one way to lessen the tension and further the dialogue may be to see it with a friend of a different faith experience. Even though it might "feel a little funny," through a respectful and open conversation about the differences and similarities in what we saw, we may discover and deepen our capacity to appreciate and even hold within ourselves multiple perspectives.

I was glad that I had seen Gibson's portrayal of "my sacred story" with a Jewish colleague who could not only also help me to see more clearly the ways in which the Christian community could be more sensitive in its understanding and portrayal of Judaism, but who could also sincerely appreciate the depths of my own faith experience.

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The Bible, the Jews, and the death of Jesus

The US Bishop's Conference recently issued a helpful collection of key documents on the Church's opposition to anti-Semitism.

In the midst of discussions and tensions surrounding the release of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ*, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a collection of key documents on the Church's relationship to the Jews and its opposition to anti-Semitism, *The Bible, the Jews, and the Death of Jesus*. As Cardinal William H. Keeler, who initially raised the idea for the book acknowledged: "The charge of collective guilt of the Jews as a people for the death of Jesus, for many centuries distorted in the minds of many Christians the central truth that it is our sins that are responsible for His death."

Collected documents range from statements on Catholic teaching about the interpretation of Scripture, Catholic understanding and proper presentation of the passion and death of Christ, and the Church's ongoing condemnation of the sin of anti-Semitism over the past forty years.

As the chair of the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, Stockton's Bishop Stephen E. Blaire, explained, "Two major developments within the Church awakened and fostered a new understanding of the relationship between the Church and its roots in Judaism. The first was the biblical movement which promoted a re-reading of the Gospels "through analysis of literary and historical forms, in order to identify a fuller theological understanding." The second was the Second Vatican Council's commitment "to re-examining its relationship with the Jewish people," beginning with "a reflection on the ongoing nature of God's covenant with the Jewish people and its implications for all of Catholic theology." The volume includes documents reflecting both of these developments.

The collection's inclusion of the Committee's 1988 *Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion* will be especially helpful in light of the controversies surrounding Gibson's depiction of the Passion. The 1988 Guidelines cover a range of concerns such as attention to the complexity and diversity of first century Judaism, care to avoid negative caricature in staging, costumes, and lighting, and sensitivity to certain biblical passages likely to be misunderstood. Quoting the Holy See's 1974 Guidelines, Cardinal Keeler summoned "any Christians involved in the presentation of the events of Jesus' death" to an "overriding preoccupation...not only to avoid portrayals of Jews that might lead to collective guilt, but also to replace them with positive ones."

Recently, as he received a delegation of the American Jewish Committee, John Paul II noted the upcoming anniversary of the 1965 Second Vatican Council declaration *Nostra Aetate*, the groundbreaking statement on the Church's relations with the Jewish people. Forty years later, "there is, regrettably, a great need to repeat our utter condemnation of racism and anti-Semitism," the Pope noted. Hopefully this important collection of documents will assist many not only in the fight against anti-Semitism, but also in efforts toward deeper understanding and dialogue.

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"...what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today... Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any person, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decrees hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone."

(From "Nostra Aetate" n. 4)

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