

This is Worth Reading

(11/14/03)

Greetings to the Church That Meets at Betsy's House,

Well I'm sure that many of you who know me will readily agree with the title of this letter. You might say that at least he's finally admitting it!! Keith Fournier is the brother-in-law of one of my closest law school classmates and I know a little about his background. He is a charismatic Catholic who loves the Lord and is passionate about justice in this country. His own life story is unique and shows God's hand at every twist and turn. Connie

Keith A Fournier is a constitutional lawyer and a graduate of the John Paul II Institute of the Lateran University, Franciscan University and the University of Pittsburgh. He holds degrees in Philosophy, theology and law. He has been a champion of religious liberty and appeared as CO-counsel in major cases at the United States Supreme Court. He is the author of seven books and, along with his law practice, serves as the president of both the "Your Catholic Voice Foundation" and "Common Good."

I really did not know what to expect. I was thrilled to have been invited to a private viewing of Mel Gibson's film "The Passion," but I had also read all the cautious articles and spin. I grew up in a Jewish town and owe much of my own faith journey to the influence. I have a life long, deeply held aversion to anything that might even indirectly encourage any form of anti-Semitic thought, language or actions.

I arrived at the private viewing for "The Passion", held in Washington DC and greeted some familiar faces. The environment was typically Washingtonian, with people greeting you with a smile but seeming to look beyond you, having an agenda beyond the words. The film was very briefly introduced, without fanfare, and then the room darkened. From the gripping opening scene in the Garden of Gethsemane, to the very human and tender portrayal of the earthly ministry of Jesus, through the betrayal, the arrest, the scourging, the way of the cross, the encounter with the thieves, the surrender on the Cross, until the final scene in the empty tomb, this was not simply a movie; it was an encounter, unlike anything I have ever experienced.

In addition to being a masterpiece of film-making and an artistic triumph, "The Passion" evoked more deep reflection, sorrow and emotional reaction within me than anything since my wedding, my ordination or the birth of my children. Frankly, I will never be the same. When the film concluded, this "invitation only" gathering of "movers and shakers" in Washington, DC were shaking indeed, but this time from sobbing. I am not sure there was a dry eye in the place. The crowd that had been glad-handing before the film was now eerily silent. No one could speak because words were woefully inadequate. We had experienced a kind of art that is a rarity in life, the kind that makes heaven touch earth.

One scene in the film has now been forever etched in my mind. A brutalized, wounded Jesus was soon to fall again under the weight of the cross. His mother had made her way along the Via Della Rosa. As she ran to him, she flashed back to a memory of Jesus as a child, falling in the dirt road outside of their home. Just as she reached to protect him from the fall, she was now reaching to touch his wounded adult face. Jesus looked at her with intensely probing and passionately loving eyes (and at all of us through the screen) and said "Behold I make all things new." These are words taken from the last Book of the New Testament, the Book of Revelations. Suddenly, the purpose of the pain was so clear and the wounds, that earlier in the film had been so difficult to see in His face, His back, indeed all over His body, became intensely beautiful. They had been borne voluntarily for love.

At the end of the film, after we had all had a chance to recover, a question and answer period ensued. The unanimous praise for the film, from a rather diverse crowd, was as astounding as the compliments were effusive. The questions included the one question that seems to follow this film, even though it has not yet even been released. "Why is this film considered by some to be "anti-Semitic?" Frankly, having now experienced (you do not "view" this film) "the Passion" it is a question that is impossible to answer. A law professor whom I admire sat in front of me. He raised his hand and responded "After watching this film, I do not understand how anyone can insinuate that it even remotely presents that the Jews killed Jesus. It doesn't." He continued "It made me realize that my sins killed Jesus" I agree. There is not a scintilla of anti-Semitism to be found anywhere in this powerful film. If there were, I would be among the first to decry it. It faithfully tells the Gospel story in a dramatically beautiful, sensitive and profoundly engaging way.

Those who are alleging otherwise have either not seen the film or have another agenda behind their protestations. This is not a "Christian" film, in the sense that it will appeal only to those who identify themselves as followers of Jesus Christ. It is a deeply human, beautiful story that will deeply touch all men and women. It is a profound work of art. Yes, its producer is a Catholic Christian and thankfully has remained faithful to the Gospel text; if that is no longer acceptable behavior than we are all in trouble. History demands that we remain faithful to the story and Christians have a right to tell it. After all, we believe that it is the greatest story ever told and that its message is for all men and women. The greatest right is the right to hear the truth.

We would all be well advised to remember that the Gospel narratives to which "The Passion" is so faithful were written by Jewish men who followed a Jewish Rabbi whose life and teaching have forever changed the history of the world. The problem is not the message but those who have distorted it and used it for hate rather than love. The solution is not to censor the message, but rather to promote the kind of gift of love that is Mel Gibson's filmmaking masterpiece, "The Passion."

It should be seen by as many people as possible. I intend to do everything I can to make sure that is the case. I am passionate about "The Passion." You will be as well. Don't miss it!

The following is a commentary by DAVID LIMBAUGH about Mel Gibson's very controversial movie regarding Christ's crucifixion. It's very worth reading.

MEL GIBSON'S passion for "THE PASSION"

How ironic that when a movie producer takes artistic license with historical events, he is lionized as artistic, creative and brilliant, but when another takes special care to be true to the real-life story, he is vilified.

Actor-producer Mel Gibson is discovering these truths the hard way as he is having difficulty finding a United States studio or distributor for his upcoming film, "The Passion," which depicts the last 12 hours of the life of Jesus Christ. Gibson co-wrote the script and financed, directed and produced the movie.

For the script, he and his co-author relied on the New Testament Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, as well as the diaries of St. Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824) and Mary of Agreda's "The City of God." Gibson doesn't want this to be like other sterilized religious epics. "I'm trying to access the story on a very personal level and trying to be very real about it." So committed to realistically portraying what many would consider the most important half-day in the history of the universe, Gibson even shot the film in the Aramaic language of the period. In response to objections that viewers will not be able to understand that language, Gibson said, "Hopefully, I'll be able to transcend the language barriers with my visual storytelling; if I fail, I fail, but at least it'll be a monumental failure."

To further insure the accuracy of the work, Gibson has enlisted the counsel of pastors and theologians, and has received rave reviews. Don Hodel, president of Focus on the Family, said, "I was very impressed. The movie is historically and theologically accurate." Ted Haggard, pastor of New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colo., and president of the National Evangelical Association, glowed: "It conveys, more accurately than any other film, who Jesus was."

During the filming, Gibson, a devout Catholic, attended Mass every morning because "we had to be squeaky clean just working on this." >From Gibson's perspective, this movie is not about Mel Gibson. It's bigger than he is. "I'm not a preacher, and I'm not a pastor," he said. "But I really feel my career was leading me to make this. The Holy Ghost was working through me on this film, and I was just directing traffic. I hope the film has the power to evangelize."

Even before the release of the movie, scheduled for March 2004, Gibson is getting his wish. "Everyone who worked on this movie was changed. There were agnostics and Muslims on set converting to Christianity...[and] people being healed of diseases." Gibson wants people to understand through the movie, if they don't already, the incalculable influence Christ has had on the world.

And he grasps that Christ is controversial precisely because of WHO HE IS - GOD incarnate. "And that's the point of my film really, to show all that turmoil around him politically and with religious leaders and the people, all because He is Who He is."

Gibson is beginning to experience first hand just how controversial Christ is. Critics have not only speciously challenged the movie's authenticity, but have charged that it is disparaging to Jews, which Gibson vehemently denies.

"This is not a Christian vs. Jewish thing. '[Jesus] came into the world, and it knew him not.' Looking at Christ's crucifixion, I look first at my own culpability in that." Jesuit Father William J. Fulco, who translated the script into Aramaic and Latin, said he saw no hint of anti-Semitism in the movie. Fulco added, "I would be aghast at any suggestion that Mel Gibson is anti-Semitic." Nevertheless, certain groups and some in the mainstream press have been very critical of Gibson's "Passion."

The New York Post's Andrea Peyser chided him: "There is still time, Mel, to tell the truth." Boston Globe columnist James Carroll denounced Gibson's literal reading of the biblical accounts. "Even a faithful repetition of the Gospel stories of the death of Jesus can do damage exactly because those sacred texts themselves carry the virus of Jew hatred," wrote Carroll. A group of Jewish and Christian academics has issued an 18-page report slamming all aspects of the film, including its undue emphasis on Christ's passion rather than "a broader vision." The report disapproves of the movie's treatment of Christ's passion as historical fact.

The moral is that if you want the popular culture to laud your work on Christ, make sure it either depicts Him as a homosexual or as an everyday sinner with no particular redeeming value (literally). In our anti-Christian culture, the blasphemous "The Last Temptation of Christ" is celebrated, and "The Passion" is condemned. But if this movie continues to affect people the way it is now, no amount of cultural opposition will suppress its force and its positive impact on lives everywhere. Mel Gibson is a model of faith and courage.

Please copy this and send it on to all your friends to let them know about this film so that we'll all go see it when it comes.

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