

# 'Passion' controversy includes papal rumor



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

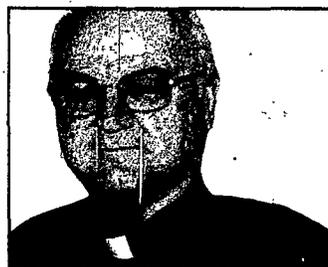
Rarely has there been a film that has stirred so much controversy and been the subject of so much advance hype as Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ."

It was said that Pope John Paul II, after viewing the film in his private apartment, gave it his papal imprimatur by declaring that the film's portrayal of Christ's passion "is as it was." That simple phrase was widely quoted and taken as a papal endorsement.

The hyperkinetic columnist, Peggy Noonan, gushed approvingly on *The Wall Street Journal's* Web site that the pope had given his thumbs-up to the film. This report was disappointing to those who had expressed concerns about the film's allegedly anti-Semitic tone and potential for poisoning Christian-Jewish relations.

Preview screenings were provided for selected members of the media and conservative figures in politics and religion, like Ms. Noonan herself; Fox News talk-show host Bill O'Reilly; Robert Novak; Paul Harvey; Kate O'Beirne (columnist for *The National Review* and panelist on CNN's "Capital Gang"); and movie critic Michael Medved, who is Jewish.

Raising so much as a word of caution about the film is subject to sharp attack. Mr. Gibson has labeled *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* "anti-Christian" for running critical articles, and accused "modern secu-



Father Richard McBrien

## Essays in Theology

lar Judaism" of wanting "to blame the Holocaust on the Catholic Church."

Frank Rich of *The New York Times* has confirmed that some of his mail has reflected this angry, anti-Semitic spirit. Because he was not invited to any press screenings, he has had to rely on the eyewitness testimony of others who gained access by other means.

A New York City Jesuit parish priest commented, "I don't think the intent was anti-Semitic, but Jews are unfairly portrayed." A Manhattan rabbi called the film "appalling" and its portrayal of Jews "painful." Associated Press religion writer Richard Ostling noted that, while the film does not impute collective guilt to the Jews as a people, there are "villainous details that go beyond the Bible."

Two prominent Jewish leaders, Rabbi Marvin Hier and Abraham Foxman, found the film to be anti-Semitic, even "incendiary."

The story about the pope's "endorsement" was groundless. Cindy Wooden, Vatican correspondent for Catholic

News Service, interviewed the pope's long-time secretary and confidant, Archbishop Stanislaw Dziwicz. There is no one more closed-mouthed in the Vatican than Archbishop Dziwicz. His decision to go on the record may have been in reaction to the way the pope's name was being misused to promote the film.

The archbishop assured CNS that the pope had "made no declaration" about the film to anyone, and indeed that the pope "does not make judgments on art of this kind; he leaves that to others, to experts."

Unfortunately, corrections of this sort rarely reach as many people as the original erroneous report.

By denying film critics like Frank Rich and mainline biblical scholars and theologians an opportunity to preview the film, its promoters have made it practically impossible for them to express any judgment, negative or positive. And if they did so, it would immediately be pointed out that they had not seen the film.

*The New York Times* reported on Jan. 23 that guests at a recent screening were asked to sign an agreement binding them to secrecy — unless they liked the film.

Is there any wonder suspicions abound regarding the moral integrity of this whole film project?

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

## MORE LETTERS

brain."

This has been my guide to learn about other cultures, customs, beliefs; to realize that mankind (generic) is more alike than different.

Janet R. Straub  
 Green Knolls Drive  
 Rochester

## He prefers porterhouse

To the editor:

I was not a little bemused by Joseph Kessler's columnist musings in your January 22 edition. He would prefer re-runs of the late Father Shamon's columns to those of the contemporary writer Father McBrien. With all due respect for Father Shamon, I cannot fathom why, in this food for thought issue, one would prefer to chew on conservative portions of Father Shamon's cubesteak as opposed to liberal portions of Father McBrien's porterhouse. But then, as is often the case, there is no accounting for taste.

Richard B. Emond  
 Theresa Drive  
 Stafford, Virginia

## Saddened by priest's death

To the editor:

I was so saddened to read Father Norris' obituary.

I remember when he was at St. Mary's in Auburn, and he was greatly loved by all of the St. Mary's children who were in the "old" school which was right next to the rectory.

At Christmas time we always sang to him. I recall when we graduated we made sure he had a seat of honor.

Avery E. Neagle  
 Bluefield Manor, Auburn

## Further insult

To the editor:

I attended the Day of Reconciliation sponsored by the Diocese in November at the Notre Dame Retreat Center. Day of Healing? Day of Reconciliation? Hah! Please do not insult victims with another day like this.

Margaret Fletcher  
 Washington Street  
 Geneva

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