

Panelists believe 'Passion' misleads

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

PITTSFORD — Hundreds of people filled Church of the Transfiguration Feb. 26 to hear four panelists discuss Mel Gibson's film, "The Passion of the Christ." The event, titled "What to Look for," was cosponsored by St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry, Temple B'rith Kodesh and the Catholic Courier.

The panelists — Father Sebastian Falcone, professor of biblical studies at St. Bernard's; Rabbi Laurence A. Kotok, senior rabbi at Temple B'rith Kodesh; Rabbi Alison B. Kobey, associate rabbi and director of lifelong Jewish learning at Temple B'rith Kodesh; and Damian Zynda, professor of Christian spirituality at St. Bernard's — offered little positive commentary about the film.

Noting that a United Pentecostal church in Denver, Colo., recently posted on its marquee the phrase "Jews Killed The Lord Jesus, 1 Thess. 2:14, 15, Settled!", Rabbi Kotok blamed Gibson for stirring up anti-Semitism.

"Thank you, Mel Gibson," the rabbi said.

Father Falcone said "The Passion" was based not on Scripture, but instead on *The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* from the *Meditations of Anne Catherine Emmerich*. Sister Emmerich, a German Augustinian nun and mystic who lived from 1774 to 1824, claimed to have visions of Jesus' Passion. Accounts of her visions were published in 1833, although her writings have never been endorsed by the Catholic Church. Her critics have claimed her work is anti-Semitic, while her defenders have argued that her narrative does portray some Jews in a positive fashion.

Gibson has acknowledged drawing on the nun's work for the film, but has also said he drew on the four

Gospels as well. However, Father Falcone noted that the film contains numerous scenes that have no basis in Scripture. For example, he said, the film depicts Mary wiping up the blood of the scourged Jesus with towels given to her by the wife of Pontius Pilate, and also depicts an earthquake destroying the temple in Jerusalem, which actually was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D.

Rabbi Kotok likened "The Passion" to medieval Passion plays that blamed Jews for killing Jesus and incited Christians to pogroms.

"The genre continues with all its potential for violence and mistrust," he said of the film and other Passion plays. To illustrate his point, he noted that the movie depicts Jewish temple guards brutalizing Jesus, although no accounts of such treatment are in Scripture.

"All of us, Christians and Jews, will become demonized and diminished by this film," Rabbi Kotok said. The only positive thing he said he saw coming out of the controversy is that it may spur people to study the stories that inspired their different faiths.

Rabbi Kobey said "the movie is, quite frankly, disgusting" and added "this movie cannot and should not be taken as the truth." For example, she said, "The Passion" depicts the Jewish high priest Caiaphas as a powerful figure, but in reality he served only at the pleasure of the Romans.

"I strongly support the issue of free speech and free art, but we have to work together to understand the facts," she said.

During a question-and-answer period following the panel presentations, one man asked about the Gospels, Sister Emmerich's writings, and how a work can be defined as "divinely inspired." Referring to Emmerich, Zynda responded by



Mike Crup/Catholic Courier

A crowd of more than 600 gathers at Pittsford's Church of the Transfiguration Feb. 26 prior to the start of a panel discussion about Mel Gibson's new film, "The Passion of the Christ."

noting that the Catholic Church "has always been cautious about private revelation."

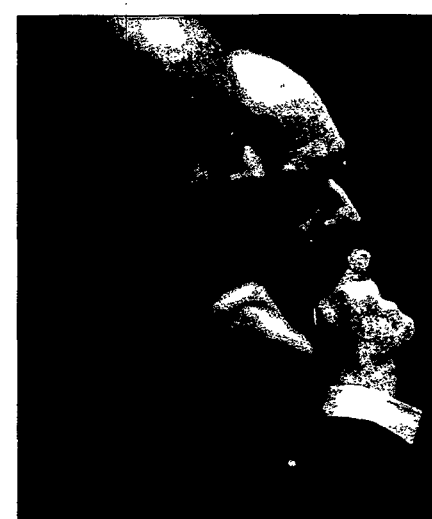
Audience members offered varied responses to the discussion. Mary Alice Westerlund, a Catholic, said the discussion made her think twice about seeing "The Passion."

"I think I will go see it, but I'm not in the huge hurry I was in before because maybe the best thing to say to Mel Gibson is to not pay for a ticket," she said. "He's presented 'The Passion' as history, and I don't agree that this is really history."

Bob Fetter, a member of Brown-croft Community Church in Penfield, said the panel may discourage people from seeing the film, but that he was going to see it. He noted that he had read a number of positive comments by moviegoers about "The Passion."

"People say they were really affected, not to hate the Jews, but to realize that (the Crucifixion) was their own responsibility," he said, adding that Jesus' death allowed Christians to "have our eternal life."

A follow-up discussion on "The Passion" — also cosponsored by St. Bernard's, Temple B'rith Kodesh and the Courier — will be held on March 11 from 7-8:30 p.m. at Burgundy Basin Inn, 1361 Marsh Road, Pittsford. Titled "What We Have



Panelists Father Sebastian Falcone (left) and Rabbi Laurence Kotok listen to a question from the audience.

Seen," it will feature Rabbis Kotok and Kobey, as well as Father Joseph Brennan, a leader in area Christian-Jewish relations and former adjunct professor of religious studies at the University of Rochester; Deacon Thomas Driscoll, director of community education at St. Bernard's; film critic Jack Garner; and the Rev. Richard Myers, pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church and president of the Greater Rochester Community of Churches.

Also, in the inaugural issue of its new monthly edition, April 7, the Courier will carry a variety of essays in which panelists and others reflect on the film and its significance for the community.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The March 11 discussion is free and open to the public. Due to intense interest in the program, preregistration is required. For information or to preregister, contact Deacon Thomas Driscoll at tadriscoll@stbernards.edu or 585/271-3657, ext. 292. A suggested donation of \$5 will support Jewish-Christian lifelong learning through the Rochester Kollel and St. Bernard's.

— Rob Cullivan

Unity Health System's priest-chaplain reinstated

Unity Health System — which includes the former St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester — reinstated its priest-chaplain, Father Winfried M. Kellner, March 1, two months after he had been laid off.

According to a statement from Unity, the priest, who formerly worked about 20 hours per week, will now work 10 hours per week performing pastoral visits, sacramental ministry and celebrating one weekly Mass. In addition to his chaplaincy

work, Father Kellner — who is also sacramental minister at Greece's Our Mother of Sorrows Parish — will continue to serve as an on-call volunteer.

Citing the need to close a budget gap for its three skilled-nursing facilities, Unity laid off Father Kellner Jan. 1. After weeks of negotiation, Unity agreed to reimburse the diocese for a portion of the costs of funding Father Kellner's position, Unity said. Father Kellner will be

considered an employee of the diocese and a volunteer in the health system, according to Mary Alice Keller, Unity spokeswoman.

Father Kellner said his dismissal provoked a strong reaction from the community, noting that many citizens wrote letters to Unity protesting the decision. He added that 550 parishioners at Mother of Sorrows Parish signed a petition calling for his reinstatement.

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