

Film a reminder of Jesus' sacrifice

Gerri Pare, David DiCerto and Anne Navarro/CNS

NEW YORK — "The Passion of the Christ" (Newmarket) is an uncompromising, interpretive dramatization of the final 12 hours of Jesus' earthly life. Unflinching in its brutality and penetrating in its iconography of God's supreme love for humanity, the film will mean different things to people of diverse backgrounds. Co-writer, producer and director Mel Gibson has undoubtedly created one of the most anticipated and controversial films of recent times.

It is a composite of the Passion narratives in the four Gospels embroidered with nonscriptural traditions and the imaginative inspiration of the filmmaker. The result is a deeply personal work of devotional art — a moving Stations of the Cross.

By choosing to focus almost exclusively on Christ's Passion, Gibson has, perhaps, muted Christ's teachings, making it difficult for viewers

unfamiliar with the New Testament and the era's historical milieu to contextualize the circumstances leading up to Jesus' arrest. And though, for Christians, the Passion is the central event in the history of salvation, the "how" of Christ's death is lingered on at the expense of the "why."

The film's visceral, undiluted realism is much too intense for children. That notwithstanding, the movie is an artistic achievement in terms of its textured cinematography, haunting atmospherics, lyrical editing, detailed production design and soulful score. Though spoken in Aramaic and Latin, the actors' expressions transcend words.

The film opens with a distraught Jesus (Jim Caviezel) facing down evil, personified as an androgynous being (Rosalinda Celentano), in Gethsemane. Flashbacks of his public ministry and home life in Nazareth with his mother, Mary (Maia Morgenstern), fill in some of the narrative blanks.

Concerning the issue of anti-Semi-



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Monica Bellucci stars as Mary Magdalene, Maia Morgenstern as Mary and Hristo Jivkov as John in a scene from the movie "The Passion of the Christ."

tism, the Jewish people are at no time blamed collectively for Jesus' death; rather, Christ himself freely embraces his destiny, stating clearly "No one takes it (my life) from me, but I lay it down of myself" (John 10:18). By extension, Gibson's film suggests that all humanity shares culpability for the crucifixion.

Catholics viewing the film should recall the Second Vatican Council's decree, *Nostra Aetate*, which affirms that, "though Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ, neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his Passion."

Overall, the film presents Jews in much the same way as any other group — a mix of vice and virtue, good and bad. Once Christ begins his laborious way of the cross, Jewish individuals emerge from the crowd to extend kindness and a chorus of weeping women lament from the sidelines.

However, the most visually distinctive representatives of Jewish authority — the high priest Caiaphas (Matia Sbragia) and those in the Sanhedrin aligned with him — do come across as almost monolithically malevolent. Caiaphas' influence on Pilate is exaggerated. Conversely, Pontius Pilate (Hristo Naumov Shopov) is almost gentle with Jesus. This overly sympathetic portrayal of the procurator as a vacillating, conflicted and world-weary backwater bureaucrat, does not mesh with the Pilate of history remembered by the ancient historians as a ruthless and inflexible brute responsible for ordering the execution of hundreds of Jews without hesitation.

The film is abundantly clear that it is the Romans who are Christ's exe-

cutioners (a fact corroborated by both the Nicene Creed and the writings of Tacitus and Josephus).

"The Passion" is exceedingly graphic in its portrayal of the barbarities of Roman justice. According to Gibson, much of the visual grisliness of Christ's suffering sprung from his own personal meditations on the Passion.

The violence does not seem an end in itself. It attempts to convey the depths of salvific divine love. Nonetheless, viewers' justifiable reaction is to be repelled by such unremitting inhumanity. Close-ups of Christ's scarred and mutilated body are truly horrible. In the end, such savagery may be self-defeating in trying to capture the imagination of the everyday moviegoer.

For those coming to the film without a faith perspective it may have little resonance. But for Christians, "The Passion of the Christ" is likely to arouse not only passionate opinions, but hopefully a deeper understanding of the drama of salvation and the magnitude of God's love and forgiveness. It is not about what men did to God, but what God endured for humanity.

Because of gory scenes of scourging, torture and crucifixion, a suicide and some frightening images, the USCCB Office for Film & Broadcasting classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

Pare is director, DiCerto is on the staff and Navarro is a consultant for the Office for Film & Broadcasting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

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