

# 'Passion' offers a teaching moment

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The *Courier* invited the essayists whose words appear on this page and the three that follow to contribute insights related to "The Passion of the Christ" for this inaugural installment of "The Forum," a new *Courier* section presenting a range of viewpoints on topics in the news.

During the past several weeks, the entire world has been exposed to the Way of the Cross and other details of Jesus' final 12 hours on earth in ways that have never happened before. Mel Gibson's film "The Passion of the Christ," offers both the Church and the Synagogue a very important teaching moment — a moment that dwells not on those who killed Jesus, but on the profound message of love and forgiveness, which are the final testament of God's Son to us.

One of the difficulties encountered by films of the life of Jesus is that they tend to be critiqued and judged — especially by scholars and theologians who are not versed in the techniques and conventions of cinematic storytelling — as if they were actual Gospels. They are found wanting at this level and dismissed or condemned. This is a danger for "The Passion of the Christ." We must remember that it is a film, and that the screenplay is a "version" of the Gospel stories with no claim to be a Gospel.

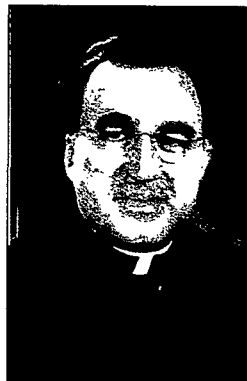
The visceral appeal of "The Passion" for many Christians lies precisely in the fact that no rough edges have been sanded off, no potentially divisive elements have been smoothed over. It is not the Gospel "lite." It depicts in many ways "reality" at its worst.

Jesus in this movie gives us a reason to live, to love, to hope, to suffer and to die unto God. He shows us that violence can never be conquered with more violence, but only with boundless love. Violence, hatred and death were not the final answers in the story of Jesus of Nazareth.

After viewing this movie three times in recent months, I know now that I will never read the Gospel accounts of the Passion in the same way again. The film's brutality poignantly conveys the depth of Christ's love by showing him freely enduring such extreme agony for the redemption of all sinners.

At the conclusion of the Stations of the Cross at Rome's Coliseum on Good Friday night in the Jubilee Year 2000, Pope John Paul II spoke these words:

"Who, if not the condemned Savior, can fully understand the pain of those unjustly condemned? Who, if



Fr. Thomas Rosica

not the King scorned and humiliated, can meet the expectations of the countless men and women who live without hope or dignity? Who, if not the crucified Son of God, can know the sorrow and loneliness of so many lives shattered and without a future?"

So many Christians and Catholics today have become numbed to the reality of Jesus' suffering and death on the cross, and to suffering in general. The poignant portrayal of the final hours of Jesus' life reveals an extraordinary model of passion and compassion that completely undermines our world of competence and competition. The contrast is stark and total in this movie: The passionate Christ jars us out of our numbness toward God, religion and the deep Judeo-Christian biblical values that are at the core of our country, society and culture. In "The Passion of the Christ," Jesus' passion penetrates the numbness of our lives.

I represent a generation of Catholics deeply marked by the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, especially the monumental teachings and new understandings of our relations with the Jewish people. Catholics of my generation have spent their whole lives with this new direction and vision, knowing only the important journey of reconciliation we have accomplished together, and the road that lies ahead.

Today's young Catholics know that the Jewish people are God's beloved people, and our elder brothers and sisters. We know about the horrors of anti-Semitism in history; we have wept at the Holocaust; we are passionately committed to working for healing, reconciliation, justice and peace. The heroic life and example of Pope John Paul II have moved us to action.

We deplore racism in all of its insidious forms. We know the libel that the Jews "killed Christ" involves a willful misreading of the New Testament and teaching: Jesus was made man and came to Earth in order to suffer and die in reparation for our sins. That some Christian churches have historically been guilty of the sin of anti-Semitism is undeniable, but in committing it, they violated their own beliefs.

We must cease the conversation,

which often turns into a monologue, rooted in mutual recriminations, reminiscent of children on a playground arguing over who started the fight. We must work together as Christians and Jews with the Scriptures in a mature and honest way, building bridges and combating and repairing the real damage of anti-Semitism, which is alive once again in the world.

The real issue arising from this film is how many political and even religious authorities throughout history have persecuted individuals with revolutionary ideas, and continue to do it today. Through his Passion, suffering and death, Jesus becomes for us a point of embarkation. As he dies, Jesus turns us outward toward people to whom we are not physically related, identifying these people as our spiritual mothers, fathers, sisters or brothers. We know that Jesus breaks down barriers between people and creates this new family by the power that flows from his death for humanity. In his death, he builds not walls but bridges towards others.

Our eternity is bound up forever with this Jew. The *tikkun ha'olam*, the healing of the world, its repair, restoration and redemption — including the redemption of Israel — has already been decisively inaugurated in Jesus' death on the cross, and three days later, in his Resur-

rection from the dead. Nothing can remove our sense of belonging to, participating in, and being the beneficiaries of God's saving encounter with Israel and with the broken world, which occurred in the crucifixion of Jesus, son of Israel and Son of God.

We have embarked on a journey of reconciliation that only moves forward. I am confident that this movie, as well as the statements and continued presence, vision and leadership of Pope John Paul II, will be catalysts and inspirations for the journey that lies ahead. It is a journey that leads to life — to reconciliation and to peace, together.

Let us commit ourselves passionately to these thoughts and give them flesh with our lives.

*Shabbat Shalom!*

This essay is derived from a sermon Rochester native Father Thomas Rosica delivered at Toronto's Temple Beth Tzedec on Feb. 27. Father Rosica, a Basilian, is chief executive officer of the Salt+Light Catholic Media Foundation and the Salt+Light National Catholic Television Network in Canada. He was national director and chief executive officer of World Youth Day 2002, and since 1994, has been the Canadian bishops' representative on the Canadian Christian-Jewish Consultation.

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