

# Question what film portrays

Religion and religious beliefs have the power to move us and challenge us in ways we are sometimes surprised to learn. It is at moments of confrontation both personal and communal that we can learn the depth of our beliefs, and then with God's help find paths to understanding and clarification. Usually these serious moments of insight and illumination are not everyday occurrences. For most of us, we spend our time neither thinking about nor challenging our spiritual life. But there are times that come to us and provide us sacred opportunity to find out who we are and what we believe. Now is one of those moments. How it will impact each of us is the unknown.

Mel Gibson's film, "The Passion of the Christ," has certainly evoked and generated an enormous amount of passion. How we interpret and learn from our reactions will determine much for all of us. This film has the potential to divide us as people of faith. There will be those who will exploit this film in negative ways that could set us back into a time of Christian anti-Jewish teaching that the modern Catholic Church has denounced. The film also has the

positive potential to move us back into our own faith communities to learn how each interprets and understands these events.

Like all great dilemmas, the risks are great and the outcome uncertain. We know there are those who have already embraced this film not as an artistic interpretation of Mel Gibson, but as "documentary truth," as if CNN had been on the scene and shot the footage. We know that path leads to misrepresentation of the story in ugly and painful ways.

The history of misunderstanding between Christians and Jews has in recent decades been replaced with a new spirit of cooperation and mutual respect. In the almost 40 years since Vatican II, Catholics and Jews have entered into honest and serious dialogue about what we share in common and where we differ. What is critically important is that these conversations now take place in friendship and mutual commitment to learn about our faith communities. We have much to give thanks for after the painful years of mistrust and recrimination. This film has the potential to help us focus on the good that we have accomplished together and to challenge us to continue to move forward in our relationship.

If one looks at the Passion story from the Gospels, it appears in four forms, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, each with some variation from the other. Those who witnessed these events in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago did not write the accounts. The writing down of the events took place decades later. From that time forward those who read the Gospels or heard them were able to develop

their own internal pictures of what happened. The events became for believers a powerful internalized vision that moved and changed them. Is it perhaps that these transforming events found their sacred place in the souls of Christians, specifically because of the way the story became transmitted? Though, through time artists have attempted to capture the words of the Gospels in visual form, the power of the story has continued to be found for Christians in the word itself. Should this paradigm of faith be so graphically and violently portrayed? Is it in the story or the film that faith should be found?

What has also changed with this film is the exclusive claiming of truth and accuracy that is unfounded in fact. The long list of inaccuracies and deviation from the Gospel sources along with the numerous gratuitous embellishments that are not true to the story have been chronicled by many who have written about this film. These changes that Mel Gibson has inserted have colored our understanding of the story and potentially are quite dangerous to interfaith relationships. There have been claims that Mr. Gibson is anti-Semitic in the way he has portrayed the role of a group of Jewish leaders headed by Caiaphas, the high priest, in his movie. By a careful reading of the Gospels we learn that Caiaphas is only mentioned by name eight times — twice in Matthew, once in Luke and five times in John. Why then does he appear in every scene of conflict in this movie? To place Caiaphas and his group in the forefront seems to me to be making a misrepresentation of the role and power of the Jewish leaders of the time, who served at the whim of the Roman authorities. What is Mr. Gibson's intent? I cannot answer for him.

We live in a world where people seem to believe what they see, or more accurately to our discussion, what they are shown in a film.

Movies like this one should send us back to the sources, to our faith



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

## Rabbi Laurence Kotok.

communities to learn and to question that which is being portrayed. To merely accept what we see as correct without investigation would be untrue to our personal relationship with our faith journey. Through creative dialogue we grow and learn and are better able to reflect the teachings of our faith.

I believe in the power and the relevance of interfaith dialogue. We are fortunate to live at a time when we can have open and honest conversations about our faiths with each other. It was not always the case that a rabbi would be asked to write an article for the *Catholic Courier*. Our ability to share our views, to learn from each other is a distinct and powerful blessing. The book of Deuteronomy teaches us that there are both blessings and curses in life — sometimes if we can see beyond the moment we are able to transform one into the other. This movie has the potential to reverse years of positive inter-religious relationships, if we permit those negative voices to exploit this film. It is my hope that we will reject the forces that would divide us. It is my commitment that this moment of challenge will reinforce our relationship of trust and dialogue. Let us continue to work together to understand and to appreciate each other's beliefs and values.

Rabbi Laurence Kotok is senior rabbi at Rochester's Temple B'rith Kodesh.

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