

POPE APPROVES "THE PASSION"; CRITICS OF MEL CONFOUNDED

Critics of the Mel Gibson movie, "The Passion of the Christ," are confounded. That's because the pope has seen the film and has extended his blessings. "It is as it was," Pope John Paul II said. Thus did he drive Mel's adversaries into a tizzy.

It was on December 17 that Peggy Noonan broke the story in "Opinion Journal," an online editorial posted on the *Wall Street Journal* website. The Catholic League's immediate response was to comment on those critics of Gibson—none of whom has seen the film—who harbor an agenda to discredit the film.

Consider, for example, some members of an ad hoc committee of Catholic and Jewish theologians. Paula Fredriksen has accused Gibson of promoting violence. Father John Pawlikowski has blasted the Catholic League for defending Mel, calling him a "heretic." Moreover, Philip Cunningham and Sister Mary Boys have joined the other two in denouncing Gibson for allegedly violating their own trumped-up rules governing depictions of the Passion. "Acting like proponents of a neo-Hays code," we said, "they arrogantly think Mel should have had to run the film by them for approval." We then said, "He doesn't have to—the pope's on board."

About a week before the pope bestowed his blessings on the movie, several top Vatican officials gave their unanimous approval to the film. Members of the Vatican Secretariat of State, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (which oversees doctrinal issues) applauded Gibson for his efforts.

Father Augustine Di Noia, undersecretary of the doctrinal congregation, offered the most cogent statement on the

question of who is to blame for the crucifixion of Christ. He said that "each of the main characters contributes in some way to Jesus' fate: Judas betrays him; the Sanhedrin accuses him; the disciples abandon him; Peter denies knowing him; Herod toys with him; Pilate allows him to be condemned; the crowd mocks him; the Roman soldiers scourge, brutalize and finally crucify him; and the devil, somehow, is behind the whole action." Only Mary, Di Noia observes, "is really blameless."

When asked point-blank whether the movie is anti-Semitic, Di Noia said, "There is absolutely nothing anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish about Mel Gibson's film." Father Gus Di Noia, a Catholic League member, has said it just right.