

# **“THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST” SETS NEW RECORDS**

A news story in the *New York Post* of July 16, 2003 began by saying, “Mel Gibson’s pet project ‘The Passion’ is doomed to box-office oblivion, insiders say...” On August 3, 2003, *New York Times* entertainment critic Frank Rich said, “it’s hard to imagine the movie being anything other than a flop in America.” Now all the experts are crying in their beer.

By the end of the first weekend, Mel had earned back the \$30 million he put into the film. In its first five days, it took in over \$125 million, passing “The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King” for the best gross by a movie opening on a Wednesday. By the sixth day, it broke another record when it became the highest-grossing dead-language film ever released in the U.S. After three weekends, it had taken in well in excess of a quarter billion dollars, making it one of the top 25 highest-grossing movies in history. Projections now are it will reach the \$350-400 million mark.

When the movie opened on Ash Wednesday, a group of prominent New York Catholics and Jews went to see the movie together, and then held a press conference. The Catholic contingent included Father Philip Eichner, the Catholic League’s chairman of the board of directors; league president William Donohue; Msgr. John Woolsey, pastor of St. John the Martyr in Manhattan; and Father Paul Keenan, director for radio ministry of the Archdiocese of New York. They were joined by several rabbis from the New York Board of Rabbis, including its president, Joseph Potasnik.

The press conference was huge, drawing media from around the globe. The Catholic contingent praised the movie, and the Jewish group criticized it, but all shook hands when it was over.

The day the movie opened, 1,500 students from Kellenberg Memorial High School in Uniondale, Long Island (Father Eichner is the school's president), made a "pilgrimage of faith" by processing three miles to a local theater. They did so over the objections of a Jewish woman who protested that students carrying crosses should not be allowed to walk on a public sidewalk in front of her synagogue.

Predictions that the movie would promote violence have proven unfounded. The body count is zero.

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## **SMOKE OF SATAN**

Two reports were recently released on the sexual abuse scandal. By all accounts, the researchers at John Jay did a fine job. But it is the men and women of the National Review Board that deserve the plaudits of all Catholics: they had the courage to speak honesty about the scandal.

In many ways, the National Review Board's report vindicates what the Catholic League has been saying for the past two years. The report notes that the scandal began in the late 1960s and trailed off considerably after 1984. This coincides with the onset of the sexual revolution and its waning after AIDS was discovered in 1981.

We have also been saying that enabling bishops, ensconced in a culture of clericalism, and molesting priests, most of whom are homosexuals, are the central players in the scandal. The review board cited episcopal clericalism as contributing to "a culture of secrecy," and it noted that 81 percent of the victims were male, most of whom were postpubescent: "we must call attention to the homosexual behavior that characterized the vast majority of the cases of abuse observed in recent

decades.”

The lawyers and psychologists who gave advice to the bishops are correctly blamed by the report. Indeed, the psychologists still recommend keeping molesters in the priesthood!

Perhaps most important, the report concluded that “the smoke of Satan” entered the Church. Ironically, this is exactly what Pope Paul VI said in 1972. Many laughed at him then, but few are laughing now.

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## **EVEN PLAYING DIRTY DIDN'T WORK**

**William A. Donohue**

“The Passion of the Christ” was not only a stunning artistic achievement for Mel Gibson, it was a great Lenten gift to Christians. But it didn't happen by chance. It happened because Mel wouldn't give up, and neither would we. But it took all we had to defeat those bent on spiking the film. They played dirty, but even that didn't work.

The attack on “The Passion of the Christ” was unprecedented in its ruthlessness. Consider the following:

- The script was stolen and given to those who could be counted on to slam it.
- Tapes of the film were stolen and distributed to those who also could be relied upon to bash it.
- Mel's faith was impugned.

- Charges that violence against Jews would occur after the movie was shown were commonplace.
- Accusations of anti-Semitism were thrown around with abandon.
- Attempts to bully Gibson into changing the film were ongoing.
- Demands for a postscript were made by those who sought to put Gibson on the defensive.
- Bishops were badgered to get Mel's friends in line.
- The Vatican was lobbied to criticize the movie.
- Vatican sources were pressured into saying the pope didn't say of the film, "It is as it was."
- Accusations that the movie was being kept away from Jewish neighborhoods were made.
- Fears that the movie might damage youngsters who saw it were expressed.
- Demands that Gibson vet his script for approval to officials of the Catholic Church were constantly made.
- Attempts to discredit the film were made by those who said it wasn't authentic, including by those who had no problem with the wildly inaccurate movie, "The Last Temptation of Christ."
- Critics deceitfully gained admission into

screenings of the film.

- Highly personal questions about Gibson's life were raised.
- Sneering comments that the film might make a profit were voiced.
- The way the movie was marketed was raised in a derisive way.
- Demands that the film be censored were made at public rallies.
- Catholics who defended the movie were insulted by foes of the film.
- Bishops were pressured to denounce the movie as being unfaithful to Church's teachings.
- Disrespect for Gibson's artistic rights were evidenced over and over.
- Mel's 85-year-old father was attacked even though he had nothing to do with the movie.
- Police detectives were ordered into theaters to assess whether the movie might promote violence against Jews.

Besides the dirty play, there was also the double standard; never was it more obvious. Every time the Catholic League has complained about an offensive movie, we've been told to lighten up—it's just a film. Every time we've complained about an offensive artistic exhibit, we've been told not to go see it. Every time we've complained about an offensive TV show, we've been told to simply change the channel. But when it comes to movies, exhibits, and TV shows that our foes find offensive—including nativity scenes on public property—then

all of a sudden there is a direct cause and effect relationship at work that merits the attention of Washington.

Nothing demonstrated the pure hypocrisy of our critics more than their passivity to the story in the *New York Post* that told how 20 detectives of the NYPD were ordered into the theaters to monitor the movie. Had this been an alleged anti-Catholic film they were asked to check out, all hell would have broken loose.

It gets better. When a Jewish woman from the New York Civil Liberties Union called me to learn why she had been sent a copy of our news release on this issue, she seemed slightly amused to hear me warn of the “chilling effect” that such a police action might have on free speech. She begrudgingly acknowledged that I had a point, but she also said it was proper for the police to assess whether the film might promote violence against Jews. Now if she had learned that the cops were checking to see if “Schindler’s List” might provoke hate crimes against German Americans, is there any doubt that her calls of fascism would have been heard in Munich?

But as I said, even though they played dirty, they still lost. And that’s something we can all relish.

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## **Prominent conservatives join the chorus against “the passion”**

***By Kenneth D. Whitehead***

Many of the attacks on Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the

Christ" should have been expected. They have mostly come from secular liberals who have already manifested their hostility to Christianity in the public life of the United States. As some wag noted almost as soon as the movie was announced: "If you didn't like the book, you won't like the movie." Those who have characterized Mel Gibson's graphic depiction of the sufferings of Christ as "pornographic" surely mostly have no objections to actual pornography, and so what are they so upset about?

Probably it goes back to their intense dislike of seeing authentic Christianity portrayed in a serious way in a society which has supposedly left all that behind as an outmoded (but still dangerous) superstition.

It is disappointing, though, when not just knee-jerk secular liberals but prominent conservatives whom Catholics have generally had cause to admire—for many of their positions on the right side in our current culture wars—find it necessary to join in the by-now unprecedented chorus of frantic and sometimes even hysterical criticism of "the Passion." Talk about hate speech! The very thing Mel Gibson was supposedly fomenting against the Jews is what has relentlessly been directed against him!

So it is disappointing when respected figures such as historian Gertrude Himmelfarb and columnist Charles Krauthammer, in columns published in *The Washington Post* (3/5 & 3/7/04), decide they have to join the jeering chorus of the Christianity-despising cultural elites. The criticism of these elites has long since exceeded the bounds of the respect which citizens in a pluralistic society ought to have for the religious beliefs of others, and, too often, beyond the bounds of common decency itself.

Professor Himmelfarb, like so many of the earlier critics of the film, does not even think it is necessary to go see it. Rather, she is concerned about its effect as a "phenomenon" on the "culture." "Depictions of violence and barbarity that may

have spiritual meaning for a particular faith," she writes, "may not only be derogatory to another faith but also detrimental to society." She goes on:

"How would we (Gibson and all the rest of us) feel if a Hollywood producer (a Hollywood so notoriously populated by Jews) made a film in the same 'over the edge' spirit vaunted by Gibson, dramatizing another historical event—the *auto-da-fé* in Spain in February, 1481, for example, in which six men and six women *conversos* (Jewish converts to Christianity) were tortured and burned alive at the stake, while richly robed prelates presided over the scene?"

How would we feel, indeed? This is not a bad description of how practically every Hollywood film ever made has *regularly* depicted the Spanish Inquisition! The same thing is true about how it has normally been described in fiction and drama, including Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov* as Exhibit A. The Spanish Inquisition is virtually always depicted as a malevolent and sinister "Catholic" thing, "while richly robed prelates preside over the scene." This is a burden that has long and consistently been laid upon Catholics. Does Professor Himmelfarb know of a single popular presentation of the Spanish Inquisition which does not do this?

Lost in the confusion about what everybody "knows" the Inquisition was, are the facts that it was more an affair of the Spanish monarchy than of the Catholic Church as such; and, by the (exceedingly brutal) standards of the time in both Protestant and Catholic Europe, it was relatively fair—it quite rigorously followed a fixed procedure and "rule of law" that resulted in a high percentage of acquittals. Finally, compared to the totalitarianisms ushered into the world following the Enlightenment, the numbers of its victims were miniscule.

Professor Himmelfarb fears a "coarsening of religious sensibility evident in the response to this new Passion play,



as if the message of Jesus is validated only by [the] degree of suffering, torture, violence....” Why is it, in a Hollywood given over generally to the portrayal of violence, that only Mel Gibson’s film is suddenly going to bring all this about? What about how Hollywood with equal regularity depicts Christians today as deluded simpletons, killjoy puritans, or ignorant fanatics hardly distinguishable from members of the Taliban? How is “religious sensibility” affected by all of this? As for concentration on “suffering, torture, and violence,” what are we to think of, for example, the Holocaust Museum, in which all these same things are relentlessly portrayed?

Syndicated columnist Charles Krauthammer presents a much harder case. The title of his *Washington Post* column is “Gibson’s Blood Libel.” He thus deliberately revives the term once used to stir up persecutions of the Jews with false accusations of ritual murder, poisoning of the wells, and such. To employ such a loaded term while accusing Gibson of “interreligious aggression” cannot but recall that old pot that called the kettle black. It ill befits Krauthammer to describe anyone as “vicious” while showing himself capable of using a term that brands Gibson as worse than a criminal.

It is sadly true, of course, that Jews have been persecuted by Christians in various times and places. This is something contemporary Christians must not only deplore but take active measures to prevent any recurrence of—as Charles Krauthammer recognizes the Catholic Church did at Vatican Council II. At the same time, the grim picture he paints implying that historical relations between Jews and Christians consisted of an almost unrelieved record of oppression of the former by the latter is a gross simplification.

In the early centuries it was the Jews who persecuted the Christians. The Talmud composed back in those days contains slanders against the Christians that easily rival those directed by modern anti-Semites against the Jews. Early

Christian writers were well acquainted with such slanders when penning replies to them in kind for which they are today reproached as "anti-Semitic." It is unfortunately true that, down through history, not all Christians have consistently followed Jesus when he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Nevertheless, the idea that the persecution of Jews by Christians, when it occurred, was always something arbitrary and unprovoked, will not stand up to historical examination.

For one thing, in later centuries, the Jews constituted a minority that would not assimilate into the Christian society of the day. While this in no way justifies persecution of them, this was not always seen at the time, and the fact of it at least makes it more understandable when it did occur. There are today many sad examples of how minorities and outsiders are badly treated by "host" societies and cultures. It is a not uncommon phenomenon in human societies. And, in medieval times, when faced with a group that expressly denied the faith that the whole of society then mostly affirmed, Christians *were* seriously concerned.

Charles Krauthammer's account, though, implies that Christian anti-Jewish sentiment was constant and consistent until Vatican Council II was brought to see the light in the wake of the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews. This fails to recognize that it was the Church, particularly the popes, that were often the protectors of the Jews from popular outbreaks against them. Pope St. Gregory the Great (590-604) strongly condemned violence against them, called for respect for their worship and liberty of conscience, and counseled equity and kindness towards them. Quite a while before Vatican II, the Second Council of Nicaea (787) decreed that the Jews should be allowed to "be Hebrews openly, according to their own religion." A papal bull of Pope Calixtus II (1190) condemning violence against the Jews and attempts to baptize them under constraint was confirmed at least *twenty-two*

*times* up to the middle of the eighteenth century. And these are only a few of the more salient efforts of the Catholic Church and her bishops in favor of the Jews in the course of European history.

Charles Krauthammer's historical account is thus both skewed and simplistic. That he fails to distinguish between a religious animus and the murderous modern ideology of the Nazis is another mark against him. He draws a direct line between the "blood libel" idea he has revived and the "six million Jews systematically murdered in six years" in wartime Europe. These six million should decidedly never be forgotten. But what "blood libel" does he think is responsible for the mass murder by those same Nazis of some nine million additional *non*-Jewish victims, of whom at least three million were Polish Catholics (not to speak of yet three million more Russian prisoners of war exterminated by the Nazis)?

No space remains to discuss his distorted view of the film itself, which he believes is untrue to the accounts recorded in the Gospels. He needs to read the Gospels! He objects in particular to the scourging, but does he have any idea of what was involved in a Roman scourging? The Romans employed a flagellum consisting of leather thongs with sharpened metal points, the effect of which could only have been what the film depicts.

His worst mistake, however, is to imagine that the "sinister, hooded" figure of Satan shown "moving among the crowd of Jews" is or was in any way intended to be directed against *them*. No Christian, viewing the film, would ever understand this portrayal of Satan as anything but a portrayal of Satan moving among *us*, as Mel Gibson surely intended.

*Kenneth D. Whitehead is a former Assistant Secretary of Education in the Reagan Administrations and a member of the Board of Directors of the Catholic League.*

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# **“THE PASSION” WOUNDS THEOLOGIAN’S EGOS**

Catholic League president William Donohue issued the following statement today on the wounded egos of theologians opposed to the Mel Gibson film, “The Passion of the Christ”:

“It’s been going on for some time now, but over the weekend it really broke loose: Catholic, Protestant and Jewish theologians are irate over ‘The Passion of the Christ.’ Having spent their entire adult lives studying the Bible, and having concluded they really don’t know very much about their subject (no argument there), they’re angry at Mel because he pays them no respect. More important, why are they angry with Mel for giving us his version of what happened when they confess they don’t know what happened? How can his portrayal be inauthentic if they don’t know what is authentic?

“Susan B. Thistlethwaite is president of the Chicago Theological Seminary. Marvin Meyer is a professor at Chapman University. Amy-Jill Levine is professor of New Testament studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School. Ex-priest John Dominic Crossan is a DePaul University professor emeritus. Zsuzsanna Ozsváth teaches Holocaust studies at the University of Texas at Dallas. Michael Evans is the head of the Jerusalem Prayer Team. Susan Bond is a Vanderbilt Divinity School professor. Stephen Prothero teaches at Boston University. Philip Cunningham is a theology professor at Boston College. Over the weekend, they made it clear that they don’t like the movie because, they say, it doesn’t conform to their understanding of Christ’s death. How unfortunate.

“What’s driving the ‘experts’ mad is the realization that all their books, articles and

lectures put together cannot compare to the influence that Mel's film will have on people all over the world. Their frail egos have been wounded. Even annihilated. Time for them to repair to the sanctity of their library carrel and contemplate starting over. It's never too late to admit failure and start on the long journey back. To Truth."

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## "PASSION" CRITICS EVINCE NEW PURITANISM

Catholic League president William Donohue commented today on how film critics of "The Passion of the Christ" are reacting to the movie:

"Having failed to tag the movie as anti-Semitic, those who hate everything about Mel's masterpiece are trying to convince the public not to see it because it's too violent. Alas, there is a New Puritanism in the land. Violence has now joined cigarettes as the new taboo.

"But as it turns out, violence, like cholesterol, can be both good and bad. Consider New York *Daily News* reporter Jami Bernard. She voted the super-violent flick, 'Gladiator,' best picture for the year 2000. But she brands Mel's film, 'a compendium of tortures that would horrify the regulars at an S&M club.' Yet she is a big fan of the Marquis de Sade—the pervert who wrote the book on S&M—and that is why she liked 'Quills.' Peter Rainer also condemns Mel's movie for delving into 'the realm of sadomasochism.' Yet he commended Spielberg for the 'gentleness' he brought to 'Saving Private Ryan.'

"Richard Corliss of *Time* thinks the only people who will be

drawn to 'The Passion' are those 'who can stand to be grossed out as they are edified.' Yet he calls the 'body halvings, decapitations, [and] unhandings' of 'Gladiator' a 'pleasure that we get to watch.' *Newsweek's* David Ansen says Mel's film will 'inspire nightmares,' though he hails as 'a must-see' movie a flick about incest ('The Dreamers'). David Denby of the *New Yorker* cites 'The Passion' as being so violent it 'falls into the danger of altering Jesus' message of love into one of hate.' This is the same guy who said of 'Schindler's List' that 'the violence [is] neither exaggerated nor minimized.'

"The New Puritans will not win this one. The public does not share their deep-seated aversion to religion nor their phony pacifism."

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## REPORTS ON PRIESTLY SEXUAL ABUSE WELCOMED

Catholic League president William Donohue offered the following remarks today on the two studies that were released regarding the problem of priestly sexual abuse:

"The researchers at John Jay did a fine job. But it is the men and women of the National Review Board that deserve the plaudits of all Catholics: they had the courage to speak honesty about the scandal.

"In many ways, the National Review Board's report vindicates what we have been saying for the past two years. The report notes that the scandal began in the late 1960s and trailed off considerably after 1984. This coincides with the onset of the sexual revolution and its waning after AIDS was discovered in

1981.

“We have also been saying that enabling bishops, ensconced in a culture of clericalism, and molesting priests, most of whom are homosexuals, are the central players in the scandal. The review board cited episcopal clericalism as contributing to ‘a culture of secrecy,’ and it noted that 81 percent of the victims were male, most of whom were postpubescent: ‘we must call attention to the homosexual behavior that characterized the vast majority of the cases of abuse observed in recent decades.’ The board correctly stressed that ‘there are many chaste and holy homosexual priests who are faithful to their vows of celibacy.’ This is exactly what we have been saying all along: while most gay priests are not molesters, most of the molesters are gay. Unfortunately, many continue to live in a world of denial about this issue.

“The lawyers and psychologists who gave advice to the bishops are correctly blamed by the report. Indeed, the psychologists still recommend keeping molesters in the priesthood! They should be shown the gate immediately.

“The report also says that ‘the smoke of Satan’ entered the Church. This is exactly what Pope Paul VI said in 1972. While non-believers will scoff at this observation, sensible Catholics know it to be true.”

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## **CRITICS SEE PORN AND S&M IN “THE PASSION”**

The following quotes are from the critics of “The Passion of the Christ”:

- Rev. Andrew Greeley calls it "sodomasochistic and pornographic."
- Christopher Hitchens dubs it "an exercise in lurid sadomasochism."
- Ex-priest John Dominic Crossan labels it "pornographic."
- David Edelstein of *Slate* finds it an "exercise in sadomasochism."
- Rabbi James Rudin brands it "a sodomasochistic film."
- David Denby of *The New Yorker* opines "It's extremely sadistic."
- Jonathan Foreman of the *New York Post* says it's "pornographic."
- A.O. Scott of the *New York Times* sees it as "high-minded sadomasochism."
- Andrew Sullivan was shocked to find it "pornographic."
- Rev. Michael Coffey, a Lutheran minister, says it's "pornographic."
- David Ansen of *Newsweek* screams "It's the sadism" that's troubling.
- Jamie Bernard of the *Daily News* notes it "would horrify the regulars at an S&M club."
- Ex-priest James Carroll sees the film as nothing but "pornographic."
- Leon Wieseltier of the *New Republic* dubs it "a repulsive masochistic fantasy, a sacred snuff film."
- Harvard professor Daniel Jonah Goldhagen was aghast at the "sodomasochistic, orgiastic display" and its "unremitting



sadism.”

–Charles Krauthammer of the *Washington Post* calls it “the most unrelenting sadism in the history of film.”

–Bill Safire in the *New York Times* complains of its “sustained sadism.”

–Al Neuharth of *USA TODAY* calls it a “wasted exercise in sadomasochism.”

Catholic League president William Donohue responds as follows:

“Christians need to take note of this mental goose-stepping, but they should also note that none of these savants found ‘Schindler’s List’ to be pornographic. What they find pornographic is the scourging and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. No doubt for some of them, the New Testament classifies as pornography as well. Indeed that is exactly what a Brooklyn rabbi told me to my face. At least now it’s out in the open.”

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## CRITICS OF “THE PASSION” CRACKUP

Catholic League president William Donohue notes today how critics of “The Passion of the Christ” continue to rant:

“In a Knight Ridder column, Rev. John Pawlikowski, director of the Catholic-Jewish Studies Program at the Catholic Theological Union, wrote the following: ‘Christians who react favorably to Gibson’s film are shamefully evading their religious responsibility.’ Thus did he indict Pope John Paul II; Cardinal Dario Castrillón Hoyos, Prefect of the

Congregation for Clergy; Most Reverend John Foley, President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications; Reverend Augustine Di Noia, Undersecretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; Cardinal Francis George, Archbishop of Chicago; Cardinal George Pell, Archbishop of Sydney, Australia; Most Reverend Charles Chaput, Archbishop of Denver; Most Reverend John Donoghue, Archbishop of Atlanta; Most Reverend Robert C. Morlino, Bishop of Madison, Wisconsin; Reverend Richard John Neuhaus, Editor-in-Chief, *First Things*; Reverend Thomas Rosica, CEO, Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation; theologian Michael Novak; and scores of Protestant leaders from virtually every denomination.

“Yesterday, *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich labeled ‘The Passion’ a ‘porn movie,’ noting ‘its laborious build-up to its orgasmic spurtings of blood and other bodily fluids.’ He also said that when Mel Gibson was speaking of his critics in his interview with Diane Sawyer, Mel must have been referring to him: ‘But Ms. Sawyer never identified me as Jewish, thereby sanitizing Mr. Gibson’s rant of its truculent meaning. (She did show a picture of me, though, perhaps assuming that my nose might give me away.)’ How observant.

“On August 3, 2003, Rich said, ‘it’s hard to imagine the movie being anything other than a flop in America.’ It must break his heart to know the film has well surpassed the \$200 million mark.

“In short, Christians who don’t agree with Pawlikowski are acting irresponsibly, and those who criticize Rich are anti-Semitic. Thus does the crackup continue.”

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# VATICAN SPOKESMAN: "THE PASSION" IS NOT ANTI-SEMITIC

Joaquín Navarro-Valls, the Director of the Holy See's Press Office, said yesterday that "The Passion of the Christ" was "a cinematographic transcription of the Gospels. If it were anti-Semitic, the Gospels would also be so." He added that the pope would have criticized the movie if it were bigoted against Jews, but, he declared, there is "nothing anti-Semitic about it." The Vatican spokesman made his comments in reply to Riccardo Di Segni, chief rabbi of Rome, who had asked the Vatican to formally condemn the Mel Gibson movie.

Catholic League president William Donohue was pleased:

"This will now settle the issue for most Catholics—the movie is not anti-Semitic. Naturally, there will always be some, most especially dissident theologians, nuns and priests, who will reject the Vatican's understanding of the film. But then again they have a long track record of rejecting lots of things the Vatican says. It would be a mistake for the millions of Catholics who have embraced this movie to allow the dissidents to distract them from the beauty of the film.

"For some Jews, this may not sit too well. That would be unfortunate, because the last thing Catholics want is bad relations with Jews. Those Jews who find the movie problematic should be treated with respect. Given what has happened to Jews throughout history, including at the hands of many Christians, it is not surprising that many Jews today would be wary of any movie that deals with the death of Jesus. But an honest dialogue between Catholics and Jews cannot proceed if Catholics—convinced the movie is a spiritual exercise absent anti-Semitism—are to pretend there isn't an honest disagreement about the movie.

"At the end of the day, however, disagreements

between Catholics and Jews need not take on any greater significance than the ordinary family quarrel. It is up to the major players on both sides to see to it that our common friendship transcends any discord about this matter."