

“THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST” OPENS AMIDST FUROR

The February 25th opening of “The Passion of the Christ” was one of the most anticipated openings of any movie in American history. That it opened on Ash Wednesday made it all the more special.

Advance ticket sales to the Mel Gibson film were astonishing. News reports cited many Protestant organizations buying up large blocks of tickets; they also cited the Catholic League as the most prominent of Catholic organizations purchasing advance tickets.

The Catholic League subsidized the sale of advance tickets and was sold out of 1,200 tickets in two days. So we bought another 2,000 tickets—they also sold like hotcakes. After that, we advised members to purchase advance tickets online.

Most of the pre-show publicity was positive, but the media seemed to hype the negative comments. Leading the charge against the movie were the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the Simon Wiesenthal Center. Abraham Foxman, national director of the ADL, and Rabbi Marvin Hier, founder of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, accused Mel Gibson of fomenting anti-Semitism.

The Catholic League was not content to simply be Mel Gibson’s cheerleader. We directly confronted Foxman in writing and Hier on television. Our unwavering defense of Gibson led us to charge that Foxman and Hier were guilty of poisoning Christian-Jewish relations. Though they deny this charge, their comments speak for themselves.

Things got so hot that William Donohue felt compelled to issue a 6-page “Open Letter to the Jewish Community.” The letter, reprinted in this edition of *Catalyst*, expresses Donohue’s

concerns over some inflammatory language made by Foxman and others. In particular, Donohue takes exception to an anti-Christian remark made by Foxman.

Critics of the movie have not been content to say that they fear anti-Semitic attitudes as a result of the film; they have charged that Christians may engage in acts of violence against Jews. Donohue maintains that such language is incendiary and irresponsible.

Many Jews previewed the film and did not find it to be anti-Semitic. Therefore, the views of Foxman and Hier are not representative of the Jewish community. On the other hand, given their prominence in Jewish circles, what they say carries significant weight: the media afford them a high profile. This explains why the Catholic League has been so determined to provide a rational response.