

“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.