

THE TRIUMPH OF MEL GIBSON

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It all happened quite accidentally. On June 11, 2003, I was asked to debate Rabbi Marvin Hier of the Simon Wiesenthal Center on the MSNBC show "Scarborough Country." The subject—the hullabaloo over a movie that virtually no one had seen, "The Passion" (the name has since been changed to read, "The Passion of the Christ").

The debate, however, had little to do with the movie. It was all about the man behind the film, Mel Gibson. Here's the proof. The first question Joe Scarborough asked of Rabbi Hier was, "What do you find troubling about the movie that's coming up possibly in 2004 by Mel Gibson?" His answer: "Well, first of all, in the article in the 'Sunday Magazine' in the *New York Times*, Gibson made it very clear that he wants to go back to the good old days, before, he says, the Catholic Church was spoiled by Vatican II. Now, Vatican II was convened specifically—one of the highlights of Vatican II was that the document declared that the Jews were not responsible for the deicide—for the death of Jesus. And Gibson says he wants to go back to the time before that."

This is revealing on several levels. Notice that Rabbi Hier's objection was not the movie, it was the person behind it. Hier had read an article in the *New York Times Magazine* that was designed to paint Mel a reactionary Catholic who objects to Vatican II. But if Mel was mad, his father was worse: he raised questions over how many Jews died in the Holocaust. In Hier's mind, this meant that Mel's account of the Passion was bound to be anti-Semitic.

To begin with, readers should know that the smear merchants never say that Mel's father questioned the number of Jews who died. What they say is that he is a Holocaust denier. Not only

is this a bald-face lie, it impugns the integrity of Jewish scholars who say the real figure is closer to 5 million than 6 million. Be that as it may, it is amazing that Mel Gibson is being held responsible for anything his father allegedly said: the man is in his mid-eighties and has no reputation of hurting anyone.

As for Vatican II, here is what I said on the TV show: "I would take exception to what Rabbi Hier says regarding pre-Vatican II-type Catholics. I mean, I've never met Mel Gibson, but people have a nostalgia for the Catholic Church before Vatican II for all kinds of reasons having nothing to do with Jews, having everything to do with the liturgy and the sacredness of the Catholic Church and its teachings and the clear-cut message the Catholic Church had."

Notice, too, that Rabbi Hier seems to think that Vatican II was all about Jews. Look what he said, before he corrected himself: "Now, Vatican II was convened specifically—one of the highlights...." Sorry, Rabbi, Vatican II was about a lot more than Catholic interpretations of the Passion.

One final point. Rabbi Hier was in such denial over the role some Jews played in the death of Jesus that I was forced to ask him whether it was the Puerto Ricans who were guilty. Later, I threw in the Aleutian Islanders and Pacific Islanders as possible culprits.

As it turned out, Mel saw the show that evening and soon asked to see me. On July 6, he came to our office in New York City and offered a private viewing; Father Eichner, chairman of the board, and league vice president Bernadette Brady, were also there. On July 22, I saw the movie again, this time at Sony Studios; Louis Giovino, the league's director of communications, accompanied me.

The movie is the most powerful dramatization of the death of Jesus ever made. It will move you the way no movie ever has or

will. To be sure, it is tough to watch at times, but then again there is no way to sugarcoat a scourging and a crucifixion, and Mel Gibson is not a sugarcoating kind of guy—he's a Catholic League kind of guy. Which explains why he joined the league the day we first met. So much for his rejection of the Catholic Church today.

A small band of Catholic and Jewish theologians, as well as the ADL and Rabbi Hier, have been working to undermine Mel's work, even though none has seen it. But the good news is this: they have become so unhinged, so drunk with ideology, that they have discredited themselves. That they are on the losing side of this strategic battle in the reigning culture wars is obvious. Mel has triumphed.

The Catholic League is not alone in defending Mel Gibson. But we are virtually alone in directly confronting those out to submarine him. Of this we are very proud, and we know you are too. That's the Catholic League way—taking on our adversaries headfirst. We know of no other way.