

Newsletter

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FOR THE STUDY OF CATHOLIC THOUGHT AND CULTURE

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Is Rockhurst Catholic?

In the Spring 2004 issue of *Conversations* magazine, Peter Steinfels advises American Jesuit universities not to forget their Catholic identities. In his research for his recent book *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America*, Steinfels notes that he found “Jesuits . . . had a particularly difficult time resisting the temptation to hide their institutions’ Catholic identity behind their order’s identity.” Steinfels implies that Jesuit universities intentionally downplay the Catholic element of their identity in order to accentuate the Jesuit element, presumably because the current “image and reputation of the Jesuits is overwhelmingly positive,” while the image of the Catholic Church has suffered in recent years. As Steinfels rightly points out, this tendency panders to a number of contemporary cultural misperceptions, not the least of which is a historical amnesia regarding the activities of the Society of Jesus through the centuries. Steinfels warns Jesuit university leaders that a marketing strategy that minimizes the Catholic aspect of institutional mission both perpetuates unfounded historical myths and distorts the source of Jesuit values and spirituality, a source constantly rooted in witness to a Christ “known and encountered through his Spirit in the Church.”

Steinfels’ article strikes close to home. At a meeting of Jesuit university faculty at Marquette University four years ago, I heard faculty complain in an open forum that “this Catholic stuff” simply had to give way to the more open and tolerant qualities of the Jesuits. When I asked for specific examples of the openness of the Jesuits and the authoritarianism of the Catholic Church, several historical incidents (always including the trial of Galileo) were mentioned. Never mind that these were often isolated incidents or the self-professed sins of an admittedly imperfect Church that in other regards had accomplished much good in promoting the spiritual, moral and physical welfare of human civilization. Never mind, as well, that in our historical ignorance we choose to forget that the Jesuits often played an active role in these embarrassing moments in Church history (again, see the Galileo affair) or that the term Jesuit was, at one time, considered synonymous with duplicity, authoritarianism and arrogance.

Never mind that many people see only the very admirable traits of the Society of Jesus and its involvement in dramatic efforts to improve the social and spiritual condition of the dispossessed people of today, while ignoring the equally admirable work and teachings of the Catholic Church in a similar arena. Never mind that without Catholic there would be no Jesuit, that Ignatius of Loyola himself would have found this distinction bewildering, that the very mission of Jesuit universities builds on values sprung from the universal Catholic message of hope and redemption, that the very people who perpetuate this dichotomy are often educated academics who should know better. What counts in today’s “what have you done for me lately” world is market, and the market clearly favors Jesuit over Catholic.

My point is not to criticize the Jesuits (after all, I consider myself a Jesuit educator) but to indicate a discrepancy in the popular perception of Catholicism.

Whereas Jesuits are given the benefit of a doubt in assessing their historical record, the broader Catholic Church (which the Jesuits serve) is held to a different, more rigorous standard. Historically, both the Society of Jesus and the Catholic Church – in its broadest designation, including all the institutions, beliefs and behaviors that are characterized as Catholic – have exhibited all the strengths and weaknesses of other human institutions, enjoying both noble and ignoble moments. But, in deference to today’s market, some Jesuit institutions are choosing, perhaps unintentionally, to validate the popular mindset by downplaying their Catholic identity. Rockhurst should be proud to call itself Jesuit, and equally proud to call itself Catholic.

In his provocative message to the Rockhurst community on February 18, theologian Todd Whitmore challenged Rockhurst to identify its roots more clearly before attempting a systematic review of Catholic social teaching. Whitmore, who directs the Center for the Catholic Social Tradition at the University of Notre Dame, studied Rockhurst promotional materials (both hard-copy and online) before visiting Kansas City. The results of his review, he confessed, were confusing. In his opinion Rockhurst exhibits a kind of schizophrenia, professing the values that stem from the Catholic tradition of thought and culture while often failing to name the source of those values. In other words, Rockhurst falls into the same trap that Steinfelds discovers at other Jesuit institutions. For Whitmore, the prescription is to be more direct in our public relations and to integrate practical examples of Catholic social thought into the Rockhurst academic curriculum and broader campus life.

The question of what makes a college Catholic is difficult and, often, controversial. Some institutions, like the Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio, measure Catholicity by strict adherence to Church precepts. Institutions like Christendom or Thomas Aquinas Colleges define Catholicism by the incorporation of classic Catholic texts and themes into the academic curriculum. Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas advertises the devotional practices of its students and the submission of its theology faculty to the much-publicized *mandatum*. Notre Dame emphasizes the rich academic resources that make it “the place where the American Catholic Church comes to think.” DePaul University appeals to its Vincentian charism and its service to the blue-collar students of Chicago. All of these strategies exercise some appeal to various Catholic constituencies. Of course, the divisions (political, ecclesiastical and intellectual) of the American Church are reflected in the nature of these appeals, and groups are fond of ridiculing the approach of their rivals and opposites.

In this personal reflection, I am less interested in the very real and substantive question of what makes a college Catholic (although I cannot help but assert that surely it means, at a minimum, that the Catholic tradition of thought and culture occupies a place at the table at least commensurate with other religious, cultural and secular traditions) than in the willingness of the institution to profess and identify its Catholic elements. If an institution is unwilling to call itself Catholic, then an honest discussion of what it means to be Catholic is unlikely. And if an institution pegs its Catholic identity on the prevailing popular perceptions of the Church, then it surely has already

disowned a part of that Catholic tradition (which teaches the courage to confront and oppose secular culture).

One of Father Andrew Greeley's constant themes over the years has been that the Catholic sensibility is as much a product of socialization, stemming from the stories and examples provided by family, friends and the local parish community, as it is the result of submission to official Church authorities. This insight helps explain why contemporary Catholics still support their local parishes and priests while criticizing the efforts of the hierarchy to control the problem of clerical sex abuse. Catholicism, Greeley suggests, is a sensibility built on acceptance of sacramental principles and the importance of community in addition to belief in specific doctrines and teachings. Catholics, Greeley notes, generally like being Catholics despite their ready acknowledgement of the occasional faults of the institutional Church.

I think there is a lesson to be learned from Greeley's observations. The Catholic identity of Rockhurst University should not be dependent on the actions of the institutional Church, which might always please some and vex others, or on the current cultural perception of the Church's image, which is really irrelevant to the Church's mission of preaching the Gospel. A "stick your finger in the air to find which way the wind is blowing" approach is calculated for failure. We must look to ourselves, not to others, to find out who we are. If we truly hold to a Catholic tradition of thought and culture (regardless of whether the individual members of our community profess communion in the Church or not) – that is, to acknowledgement of the goodness of God and God's creation, the principle of sacramentality, the special dignity of human beings, the harmony of faith and reason, the importance of community, and adherence to the common good – then we should not be afraid to call ourselves Catholic. If we do not, then calling ourselves Jesuit will not help.

I welcome your responses to this essay, which is admittedly a reflection of my own thoughts and opinions. Please address your comments to me via campus mail or e-mail (rick.janet@rockhurst.edu) and indicate your willingness to share your ideas with the rest of the community through this newsletter.

Richard J. Janet

Catholic and Jesuit? Of course we are!

I appreciate the opportunity to respond to Dr. Janet's article, *Is Rockhurst Catholic?*, and it is in the spirit of ongoing dialogue that I would like to share a few of my reactions. First, this sort of question "Is Rockhurst Catholic?" occasionally makes me a bit nervous. Often questions of this sort imply other questions such as, "Is Rockhurst *really* Catholic or is Rockhurst Catholic *enough?*" These questions often have

an inquisitional quality about them and frequently presume that there is something deficient about the organization in question. This sort of presumption may provoke a sort of defensiveness that is not conducive to dialogue and mutual understanding of very complex issues. I do not think that Rockhurst University needs to be defensive in any way about its Catholic identity.

It is my experience that the Catholic character of Rockhurst is part of the air we breath everyday. When I ate breakfast in the cafeteria this morning, I noted table information cards stating that we have daily Mass at noon, Eucharistic adoration is held on Mondays, the Rosary is said on Wednesdays, the Stations of the Cross are held on Fridays, a scripture study group is held on Tuesdays and Thursdays, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is available on Thursdays and a Busy Person's Retreat is available March 29th thru April 2nd. (Granted, many of these opportunities are due to the season of Lent, but that is entirely consistent with the liturgical experience of the Catholic Church at this time of year.)

There are other clear signs of our Catholic character. This newsletter is a publication of the Thomas More Center for the Study of Catholic Thought and Culture, which is a recent addition to Rockhurst. In addition to the Center, we have recently approved a minor in Catholic Studies for students who want to deepen their understanding of their faith tradition. Of course, this is in addition to the 15 hours of theology and philosophy that is required of all undergraduate students. Our publications prominently feature the cross on the bell tower. Rockhurst has an extraordinary record of service to the broader community that is entirely consistent with a Catholic perspective that demands faith be accompanied by good works. This is by no means an exhaustive list and I am certain it could be expanded dramatically with just a bit more thought.

Dr. Janet identifies a set of tenets that he believes to be at the heart of being Catholic (the goodness of God and God's creation, sacramentality, special dignity of human beings, harmony of faith and reason, etc.) I have no quarrel with any of these and, in fact, they represent a good portion of what is most important about being Catholic, in my experience. These values/beliefs constitute a particular perspective on reality. The challenge is trying to judge the degree to which such values permeate the Rockhurst community. It is no small task to try to assess the degree to which an individual holds a particular point of view, much less an organization as diverse as a university. It is much easier to point to some set of observable activities, which is why I made reference earlier to a list of Catholic markers.

I must admit to being a bit puzzled by the suggestion that an emphasis on our Jesuit identity is somehow done at the expense of our Catholicity. Maybe it is because I have been at Rockhurst for 19 years, but I have a difficult time thinking of Jesuit and Catholic as orthogonal concepts. When Dr. Janet refers to the Catholic perspective regarding the goodness of God's creation and the sacramental nature of that creation, I immediately think of the Ignatian call "to find God in all things." The Catholic emphasis on the compatibility of faith and reason is entirely consistent with the Jesuit

emphasis on academic inquiry and the need to engage in such inquiry with intellectual rigor. As Father Kolvenbach has noted, “Our purpose in education, then, is to form men and women for others.... We want graduates who will be leaders concerned about society and the world in which they live.” This purpose seems entirely consistent with the Catholic perspective on a faith that is in dialogue with culture and seeks justice and peace. Of course we emphasize our Jesuit character because we value those distinctive qualities, which differentiate us from other Catholic universities. (When we identify ourselves as Catholic are we somehow denying that we are Christian? I do not think so; rather we emphasize that heritage which is distinctive.)

My hope for Rockhurst University, as Catholic and Jesuit, is to be a place where “wisdom is pursued in common with all humanity and is achieved by open, intelligent, responsible, and mutually respectful interaction of points of view.” (St. Augustine) Has Rockhurst perfectly achieved such a vision? Of course not. But, we are a “pilgrim people” and we are on a journey not having yet reached a final destination. It is with a sense of the *magis* that we always seek to be better at fulfilling our mission. So, in the end, my answer to the question “Is Rockhurst Catholic?” is an unqualified yes. And, are we Jesuit? You bet, and darn proud of it!

Bill Haefele
Academic Vice-President

**The Missing Logic that Threatens the Jewish Other:
A Review of *The Passion of the Christ***

The movie did not move me as I expected it to. The violence was revolting, but it seemed appropriate to the message, rather than gratuitous: torture and execution on a Roman cross are revoltingly violent acts. If that is the topic of the film, and the means whereby the director seeks to communicate that the suffering of Jesus was enormous, more than the Gospels or other movies about Jesus have shown it to be, then it makes sense. Although *The Passion* did not appear to go out of its way to be anti-Jewish, its failure to do the opposite is precisely the source of so much of the passion it has generated, and the topic I wish to address.

The most important issue to comment upon as a New Testament scholar, and as a Jewish person, is that the movie did not make sense of the motivations of the Jewish—more accurately, Judean—leaders and crowds. The viewer must implicitly fill in the explanations, and here, I believe, lies the perpetuation of elements of the story that can fuel anti-Jewishness. The problem is perhaps not as acute for the viewer that really understands that this is an intra-Judean context—that there are no Christians, that Jesus and his followers are Jews—but it is not eliminated.

I found myself wondering throughout the film, “Why?” Why was Jesus putting himself and his disciples in harm’s way when it could so easily be avoided, since the movie makes clear that the suspicion that he sought to provoke open revolt was mistaken? Why were the Judean authorities so angry at him that they wanted him killed, when, once he was interrogated, it was obvious to them that he represented no real threat? To push the point further, why did the Judean leaders hate him? The movie’s Jesus did not seem to represent any kind of danger to Judean society, to Rome, or to anyone who upheld the ideals of neighborliness, or the hope of health and happiness for which he stood, as revealed in the flashbacks to his teaching and healing. If anything, he seemed to be suffering from delusions that should elicit pity. Why not send him packing to Galilee? Most perplexing was the reaction of the common people: Why did the Judean crowds want him killed?

After all, crucifixion provided a public forum for the Roman occupiers to remind the citizens of the subject territory that they were not free, that deviation from Roman norms would not be tolerated. As a Roman elite put the case: “Whenever we crucify the condemned, the most crowded roads are chosen, where the most people can see and be moved by this terror. For penalties relate not so much to retribution as to their exemplary effect” (Pseudo-Quintilian, *Declamations* 274; cf. Philo, *Flaccus* 84-85). To the degree that Gibson emphasizes retribution, as most movie-makers do, he misses the point. To Gibson’s credit, he did provide explanation for an extra-biblical but salient detail; namely, the Roman executioner’s motive to whip Jesus all the more, because Jesus dared to challenge his honor by not remaining down, shaming him for failing to deliver blows as decisive as he supposed. That makes sense. But what about the Judeans’ motives?

I want to know why Judean crowds would be complicit in their own humiliation, instead of sympathetic to one of their own suffering this egregious assault on human and national dignity. The Judean leaders were to a large degree held in suspicion by the people for being stooges of the occupiers and involved in Roman political machinations: the High Priest was a political appointment made by Pilate. They hardly represented the ideals of the people’s interests according to the terms decreed in Scripture and Judean tradition. Gibson does not show Jesus to be guilty of any crime that threatened their interests. Disagreement about theological matters was a way of life—indeed, tolerance of diversity of beliefs held an honored place—hence, there were Judaisms. The sign hung above Jesus, “The King of the Judeans” provides a clue, not about blasphemy, but about political subversiveness. The story that leads to that ironic ending must make sense of the sign’s presence, for Judeans as well as the Romans who placed it there. Does that historical detail not provide reason to understand that however reluctant the crowd would likely be, it would probably take the normal, human course of seeking to avoid being identified with a fellow-Judean charged with insurrection, to distance itself from membership in his little known, Temple-disrupting Galilean-based group, and thereby to hopefully escape the same brutal result? Such a crowd would not *want* to see a fellow captive of the Roman regime crucified, but more importantly, would consist of individuals who do not want to share in such a fate, and who thus *say* what they must to escape it. Would not the Judean leaders, at least most of them, to the

degree that they valued Judeanness as well as Jewishness, suffer conflicting responses for similar reasons? Would not any shouts of “Crucify him” ring out with constrained sadness for their shared plight, rather than pathological glee? Would that reasoned portrayal of events not be true to the Gospels as well? Instead, the viewers witness an implicit, insidious motive, not human, but evil incarnate, personified in the androgynous figure of Satan, who moved like a disease among the Judean leaders and crowds.

Movie-goers must wonder why the Judean people were against the ideals of love and freedom that Jesus proclaimed. It is not logical to suppose that reasonable human beings would oppose such values, which are, as any Jewish person knows, at the heart of Jewish faith and life. These values explain the very reason for Jesus’ own appeal to the Jewish people that followed him—and to any people, one would suppose. Therein is the problem. In addition to needing to communicate the crushing oppression of Roman rule, does the director not bear responsibility to explain probable politico-social motives for the Judean leaders’ complicity with Rome, and most importantly, for those (few!) Judeans that the Gospels implicate, rather than leaving their inexplicable behavior open to be filled in as it has been so often, with the suspicion if not charge that the Jews are constitutionally different than the Christian “us”?

Concerned reaction to this film is based on good historical evidence of where the reasoning of crowds watching this story often leads. Indeed, the implied reasoning that Jews must be unreasonable, different than other people—like the androgynous beast itself?—has been made explicit all too often during the Christian era: the Jews rejected God, and their continued presence bears witness to a sinister people that incomprehensibly, yet knowingly turns its back on God’s love.

So when the Roman Catholic director of this film is understood to be dismissive of Vatican II, which Jewish people know heralded an historic change of attitude on precisely this matter, it is no surprise that Jewish viewers and those sensitive to their plight raise objections. The filmmaker has an obligation to communicate “why” Judean leaders and crowds of those who do not know Jesus personally would want someone killed by the Roman governor; he must challenge the traditional but now discredited point of view. Otherwise, barring a logical explanation that resonates with the reasoned motives of the Christian viewers, they are left to conclude that there is something fundamentally different about the motivations of those who do not share their faith. That Jews are not reasonable. They must have something wrong with their hearts.

Gibson can appeal to the Gospels and many traditional interpretations of them to legitimate the choice to leave the vehement opposition to Jesus unexplained, as he does. But he must recognized that he freely departs from the details found in the Gospels on many points, not least that Jesus was arrested at night precisely because the leaders feared that the crowds would be sympathetic to his plight (Mk 14:1-2; just the kind of logic found *within* the Gospels that Gibson does not choose to employ). Of course, deviation from the Gospels is to be expected of a movie. What I am trying to say is that that Gibson does not need to deny the Gospels to explore the different motives of

Judean leaders and crowds, but the failure to pursue a reasonable human explanation plays to the pre-Vatican II suspicion of inherent difference, indeed, of evil, so that even if perpetuating that message could be justified by certain interpretations of Gospel language, it should not be.

The interpreter is always culpable. Gibson knows that the way the crucifying of Jesus has been portrayed has brought harm to those upon whom it has been traditionally blamed. When opposition was mounted, he was circumspect enough to leave off the English subtitle citing the blood-curse, although it apparently remains in the Aramaic shouts.

I do not know if Mel Gibson thought about the issues in the way posed herein, and I doubt he intended any harm. But those who recognize this implicit danger must speak up. Fulfilling that responsibility should not be understood to devalue that which others find meaningful and good in the film, which would constitute a failure to empathize from the other side.

The attention the movie has generated reminds one of the continued relevance of the historical interpretive task for contemporary life—and the need to understand the reasoning of “the other.” The challenge is to tell what is good in “our” story without needing to deny the good in “theirs.”

©Mark D. Nanos, Ph.D.
Soebbing Visiting Scholar

Unraveling Layers of Context: Thoughts for Making Sense of *The Passion of The Christ*

Already hundreds have commented on Mel Gibson’s film, *The Passion of The Christ*. “Passion,” in this case, may refer to both the story’s content and to the sentiments this film has invoked among its enthusiasts and detractors. The rhetorical environment created by *The Passion* has arguably become more noteworthy than the film itself. As such, my comments focus primarily upon issues of context for making sense of Mr. Gibson’s work.

I would like to suggest that any assessment of *The Passion* requires attention to the richly textured layers of biblical and cultural history that shape our responses to the film. First, the gospel accounts of Jesus’ passion are the fruits of distinctive interpretive traditions. In Mark—written some forty years after the crucifixion—we receive our first (known) textual narration of the passion, one that combines the oral tradition passed on to Mark with Mark’s own discursive interests in light of his community’s recent suffering through the destruction of the Second Temple. Matthew and Luke, despite using Mark as a source, present the story in their own ways, at times diverging from

Mark, and at times reflecting his narrative verbatim. John preserves many elements of the evolving tradition while painting a substantially different portrait of the passion than is found in the synoptic gospels.

It is also important to note that, chronologically, each gospel account reflects increasingly calcified tensions between the Jesus movement and the Judaism from which it sprang. Division over the authenticity of Jesus' messiahship and divergent attitudes toward the Temple's destruction as a young "Christianity" sought to distance itself from Judaism in light of Roman persecution, all contributed to a climate of acrimony. This acrimony is reflected in the progressively more virulent gospel rhetoric directed against Jewish leadership and, by the time John is written, seemingly against the Jewish people collectively.

The next contextual layer is the interpretive tradition of the passion narratives. For nearly two millennia, these narratives were utilized to cultivate faith, pathos for the suffering Jesus, awe toward God's power, and antipathy toward those who reject Jesus' messiahship, especially Jews. No comprehensive assessment of the film could ignore that by the medieval period "passion plays" that interpreted the rhetoric of the gospels were employed to mobilize hatred and violence toward the Jewish people, labeled collectively as "Christ-killers." This discursive use of the passion plays continued well into the 20th century in many parts of the Western world. It is therefore not surprising that to many Jews and non-Jews alike, portrayals of the passion are not perceived as a benign testament of Christian faith. At the same time, no comprehensive assessment could ignore that the model of Jesus' suffering depicted in the passion narrative provided comfort to Christians who suffered, from the early martyrs of the Church, to medieval victims of the plague, to slaves on plantations in the American South, to contemporary Christian victims of religious persecution in other parts of the world today.

The Holocaust and its aftermath, another layer, assured that the passion's anti-Jewish overtones could not be separated from the modern anti-Semitism that imagined Jews as a "race" worthy of suspicion and persecution. It was not lost on Christian Church leaders, including Roman Catholics, that the roots of this anti-Semitism, with its suspicion of those inheriting "Jewish bloodlines," could be traced to Church synods in the Iberian peninsula roughly six centuries after Jesus—sentiments emboldened by particular verses from the passion accounts in the gospels (esp. Mt. 27:25). Nor was it lost on Church leaders that nearly all of the Nuremberg Laws by which the Nazi party systematically stripped German Jews of their civil rights had precedents in nearly 1600 years of Church councils and synods, including the barring of Jews from professions, the relocation of Jews into ghettos, and the requirement that Jews wear distinctive markings on their clothing to identify themselves as Jews.

Recognizing the role Christianity played in creating a climate in which a Holocaust was possible (a very different claim than maintaining a direct causal relationship between Christianity and the Holocaust), theological documents, including the *Ten Points of Seelisberg* from the Protestant Conference at Seelisberg, Switzerland,

and Vatican II's, *Nostra Aetate*, each attempted to tackle the issue head-on and renounce the history of anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic discourse and persecution while setting guidelines for future Christian relations with Jews. Anti-Semitism continues to thrive in some parts of Europe and the Middle East—locations where the screening of *The Passion of The Christ* may take on substantially different meanings than those emerging in the U.S. It certainly thrives in some subcultures within the U.S. as well.

We also have a distinctively American context from which to assess this film. We live in a country guided by an ideology that, on the whole, promotes the freedom of religious expression. If attendance at religious services is a valid measure, then the United States consistently ranks among the most religious countries in the world, in part—no doubt—because of our separation of Church and State and our protection of religious expression in the majority of cases (with a few notable exceptions throughout our history). However, there are deep cultural fissures in the U.S., and many of those fissures stem from the intersection of religious ideology with particular ideological conceptions of freedom. “Freedom to” is often in conflict with “Freedom from” as we inevitably share space and other resources with those who see the world differently from ourselves.

As historian of religion R. Laurence Moore has noted in *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (Oxford, 1986), cultural fissures have thrived from our propensity to define ourselves against perceived outside threats. Conservative Evangelicals and others see themselves as threatened by those worldviews commonly labeled “secular,” the non-religious and liberal-religious see themselves threatened by conservative Christian influences, civil libertarians see themselves threatened by self-appointed cultural critics, and those critics see themselves threatened by the value systems that have arisen in a society bent on preserving civil liberties for close to 300 million people (some of whom we’re bound to dislike). Nearly all of us align ourselves with particular factions in these cultural contests.

I would argue that popular discourse surrounding films like *The Passion* are as much about engaging in the ritual of drawing socio-cultural boundaries as they are about any genuine concern for the film itself. When boundary drawing is coupled with the forces of capital and can generate adequate advertising dollars for those programs that specialize in cultivating social fissures (think talking heads that scream over each other in the pseudo-news programs on cable news networks), then you have the recipe for a “significant” social phenomenon—one that VH1 or MTV can re-market a decade from now when they do their retrospectives of the “important” events of 2004.

Which brings us to the contextual layer of the director himself, for *The Passion* is nothing if not Mr. Gibson's interpretive vision. As a—now—devoutly religious man, few could doubt that the film represented Mr. Gibson's sincere attempt to pay homage to his Savior. Mr. Gibson has said that his depiction is straight out of the gospels themselves. He has also said, in turn, that critics who call his film anti-Jewish have their real gripe with the gospels. As noted earlier, there is certainly truth to Mr. Gibson's claim, for anti-Jewishness is present in the gospels.

Furthermore, Mr. Gibson claims to give a realistic portrait of the suffering of Jesus up to and including his crucifixion. That Jesus suffered—like all who were crucified by the Romans—is self-evident (the objections of early Christian docetists who denied the possibility that a divine being could suffer notwithstanding). That the film portrays the extent of Jesus' suffering accurately is impossible to know and clearly debatable. The gospels did not go into the detail that the film depicts.

Some things are not debatable, however. The most important may be that several elements of *The Passion* are nowhere to be found in the Christian scripture. Among these are the ubiquitous presence of an androgynous demonic figure who haunts Jesus throughout the narrative; a Jesus who spoke Latin to Pilate; the centrality of the High Priest as the arch-nemesis of Jesus throughout the narrative; a touching scene when the wife of Pilate meets Mary the mother of Jesus; the elaborate rationalizing that Pilate engages in with his wife as he grudgingly opts to do the bidding of the priests (a very implausible scenario given what little we do know about Pontius Pilate); the conflation of Mary Magdalene with the adulteress Jesus saves from stoning; the very developed character of Simon of Cyrene who goes toe-to-toe for Jesus against the Romans; the bird gouging the eye of one of the criminals crucified with Jesus; the list goes on....

Directors impact every element of a film, from the costumes that convey important messages about which characters to sympathize with and which to disdain, to the intonation of line delivery on the part of the actors, to how long the camera lingers on a character or a lash of a whip. My point is not that Mr. Gibson had no right to artistic license. On the contrary, he has every right to such license (how could a film portrait of the passion narrative avoid artistic license?). However, when Mr. Gibson claims that he's only relaying the "truth of the gospels" and that, as he has contended, the Holy Spirit guided the making of the film, he essentially cultivates the image of himself as a conduit engaged in relaying "Truth" to the viewing public. Perhaps the Holy Spirit was guiding the making of the film. I could also argue that the Holy Spirit is guiding me in the writing of this review. While such claims are provocative, they are in no way verifiable. In fact, the social utility of this claim rests precisely in our inability to refute it, not to mention the "cover" of authority it provides to human preference and action. By portraying himself as merely a conduit, Mr. Gibson's contentions belie the reality of a creative individual making choices. Whether we like those choices or not, we would be at best naïve, or at worst, dishonest to pretend that no choices were made. I would be far more comfortable with Mr. Gibson asserting that the film reflects *his* theological vision and that if we did not like it, we were free to make a film that reflected our own. But that's just my preference.

Which brings us to the final contextual layer to consider when assessing the film: we the viewers. Each of us who attends *The Passion* does so from a distinctive place in this world. We each have our own ideological commitments, our own aesthetic values, our own theological, non-theological, or anti-theological perspectives, and our own histories with or impressions of the passion narrative. People I have spoken to left this film in tears, or numb, or bored, or disgusted, or angry, or ambivalent, or inspired. Each response tells us as much about ourselves as it does about this film. I make a living

trying to contextualize those beliefs and practices we label “religion” with the hope that greater awareness of such contexts enables us to engage our world with more interest, more pleasure, and ultimately, more wisdom. When assessing *The Passion of the Christ*, or any work of human creativity, the same rules apply.

Craig R. Prentiss
Department of Theology

Murder and Redemption in Missouri: A Book Review

Michael W. Cuneo, *Almost Midnight: an American Story of Murder and Redemption*.
New York: Broadway Books, 2004.

When Michael Cuneo launched his academic career as a sociologist specializing in the Roman Catholic Church in North America, he probably never could have imagined that in the year 2004 he would author a book prominently displayed in the “True Crime” sections of major bookstores in America. Combining the skills of an academic researcher with a journalistic writing style, Cuneo tells the gripping story of a triple homicide in the Missouri Ozarks in 1988. In order to appreciate both the background and the events of this crime, Cuneo traveled the backroads of rural Missouri and immersed himself in a world of drug dealers, criminals, cockfighters, and Pentecostal preachers.

The facts of the case are straightforward: in 1990 Darrell Mease, a local Ozarks man from “Mease Hollow” in Stone county Missouri, was convicted of murdering sixty-nine year old Lloyd Lawrence, a crystal meth druglord, Lawrence’s wife, and their paraplegic grandson. Mease, who grew up well-liked by all and active in his church, returned from Vietnam with a drug habit that would lead him to become a small time drug dealer and finally a convicted murderer. The crime itself was brutal and seemingly straightforward in motive and execution. But Cuneo explores additional questions: Why had Darrell Mease also murdered Lawrence’s wife and grandson when his feud was with Lawrence? Was Mary Epps, Mease’s lover and traveling companion while on the lam from authorities, a victim or an accomplice?

While in jail awaiting trial and sentencing, Mease had a religious experience. Unmoved by the skepticism of most who laughed that criminals in jail were always finding God, Mease refused to talk publicly about his conversion saying only, “God is my lawyer,” and that God had shown him in a vision that he would not be executed.

Mease was sentenced to die by lethal injection. After the requisite appeals had been exhausted, the state of Missouri set the execution date for January 27, 1999. Unknown to state officials, January 27 was the very date that Pope John Paul II was scheduled to visit St. Louis. To execute a man on the same day that the most prominent

spiritual opponent of capital punishment was slated to visit Missouri was not only an embarrassingly insensitive affront to the large Catholic population in Missouri but potentially a huge political blunder. Governor Mel Carnahan was engaged in a tough campaign against John Ashcroft for the U.S. Senate, and the question of capital punishment had already become a political issue.

In his two terms as governor, Carnahan, a Southern Baptist, had previously refused to commute many death sentences. However, this case was different--not because of the crime itself--it was heinous, and if ever the death penalty was deserved, it was in this case. But Mease's case was unusual because of a special request from John Paul himself. In a moving interfaith prayer service presided over by the Pope and attended by Governor Carnahan, the Pope, at the conclusion of the service, made his way to the Governor and asked, "Governor, will you please have mercy on Mr. Mease?" The Pope did not ask Carnahan to change his personal opinion about capital punishment, nor to change the laws of Missouri. He pleaded only for the life of Mease. Struggling with issues of conscience and politics, Carnahan, just months before his own tragic death in a private plane crash, honored the Pope's request and Mease's sentence was reduced to life without parole.

Though I admit that "true crime" is not a genre of literature I normally read, *Almost Midnight* is more than simply a well-told and fast-paced story. It truly is, as the subtitle indicates, a story of both murder and redemption. While many would consider the commutation of Mease's sentence to be an underserved stroke of luck, others, including Mease himself ("God is my lawyer") considered it to be providential, not accidental.

The Kansas City community will have an opportunity to hear Michael Cuneo tell this gripping story of crime and redemption when he visits Rockhurst University on the evening of April 28 at 7:30 (see the notice in this newsletter). Plan on attending what will, most assuredly, be both an entertaining and an informative presentation.

Wilburn T. Stancil
Department of Theology

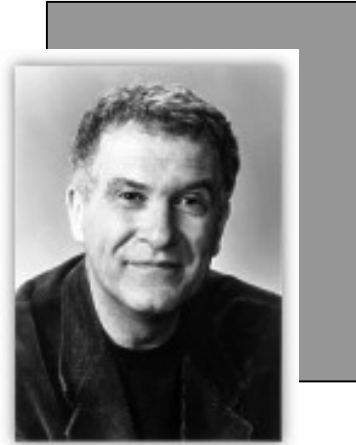
LECTURE NOTICE

Michael Cuneo, Ph.D.
Fordham University, New York

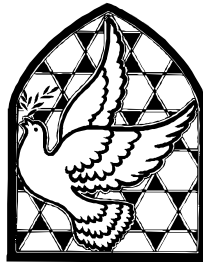
“Almost Midnight: A Story of Crime and Punishment in Southwest Missouri”

Wednesday, April 28 at 7:30 p.m. in the Mabee Theater

Michael Cuneo is an associate professor of sociology and anthropology at Fordham University. His most recent book is a true crime story hitting close to home, *Almost Midnight: An American Story of Murder and Redemption*. It is a story about a triple murder in the Ozarks and the Pope’s role in saving the murderer, Darrell Mease. He has written other highly acclaimed books: *The Smoke of Satan: Conservative and Traditionalist Dissent in Contemporary American Catholicism* and *American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty*.



This public lecture is free and open to the public. To register your attendance, call (816) 501-4828.



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