



Nothing Succeeds Like *Excess*

FR. GENE D. PHILLIPS, SJ,
REACTS TO MEL GIBSON'S
THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST

interview by George Kearney

Fr. Gene D. Phillips, SJ, professor of English and film at Loyola University Chicago, was ordained a priest in 1965, and then earned a Ph.D. in English from Fordham University. Fr. Phillips is a founding member of the editorial board of *Literature/Film Quarterly* and has written well over 100 articles on literature and film. He's also authored 19 books and contributed to many more. His most recent book, *Godfather: The Intimate Francis Ford Coppola*, was published by University of Kentucky Press. He's currently working on a book about David Lean, director of *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Bridge Over the River Kwai*. Fr. Phillips has served on special juries at the Cannes, Berlin, and Chicago International Film Festivals and has appeared on BBC Radio, Radio Free Europe, and numerous TV and film documentaries. He's also a regular guest on Extension 720, a Chicago radio program.

Q Do you feel the film succeeded in accurately representing the gospel story of the Passion?

A Having read a number of reviews and feature articles about the film in both Catholic and non-Catholic journals, I am in the majority by saying "No." The American Bishops published a document a few years ago about the dramatizing of Christ's life either on stage or screen. Among other things, they warned against the "cut and paste" approach to the Gospels when making a film about Him. It is what I call the "super market" approach: Mel Gibson pushed his "grocery cart" down the aisle and selected items from various Gospels and put them together in the film. This doesn't give a coherent presentation of any of the four Gospels, but a mix of them. The same episcopal document warns against filmmakers ignoring the secular historians whose works cover the period of Christ's life. The authors of the Gospels were men of faith, not professional historians; they cannot always be trusted to give a faithful record of historical personages or events. Secular historians of the time, like Josephus and Tacitus, make it clear that Pontius Pilate was not the humane Procurator of Judea whom Gibson gives us. His film portrays Pilate as a vacillating Roman governor, pressured by Caiphias and the Sanhedrin into sanctioning Christ's death. The historians of the time maintain he was cruel and stubborn, known to execute troublemakers without a trial, and was summoned to Rome by the emperor for his cruelty while in office. Moreover, the Apostle's Creed states that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried." It doesn't say

he suffered under Caiphas and the Sanhedrin. So Gibson, in playing down the fact that only the Roman governor could order a crucifixion, seems to pass too much of the blame onto Caiphas and the Sanhedrin. The Bishops' document, mentioned above, emphasizes that Pilate was a ruthless tyrant, not a weak administrator who let Caiphas do his thinking for him.

Q Prior to its release earlier this year, the film was labeled by some as anti-Semitic. To what degree, if any, do you feel this is true?

A The charge of anti-Semitism sprang primarily from an early version of the script that was circulated to religious leaders of various faiths. To Gibson's credit, he took out lines like "His blood be upon us and our children," spoken by the Jewish mob in one of the Gospels. And he made some other refinements to avoid the film appearing to endorse the old epithet that Jews are "Christ-killers." But the stain of anti-Semitism lingered on the film after it was released. When the Gospel authors implicated the Jews in Christ's passion, they did not mean all Jewish people then alive or yet to be born. They meant the Temple elite led by Caiphas, who feared Jesus might provoke Pilate and Rome to come down on the whole Jewish community because He might appear to the Romans to be a rabble rouser, fomenting revolt against the Empire. But because, as I indicated earlier,

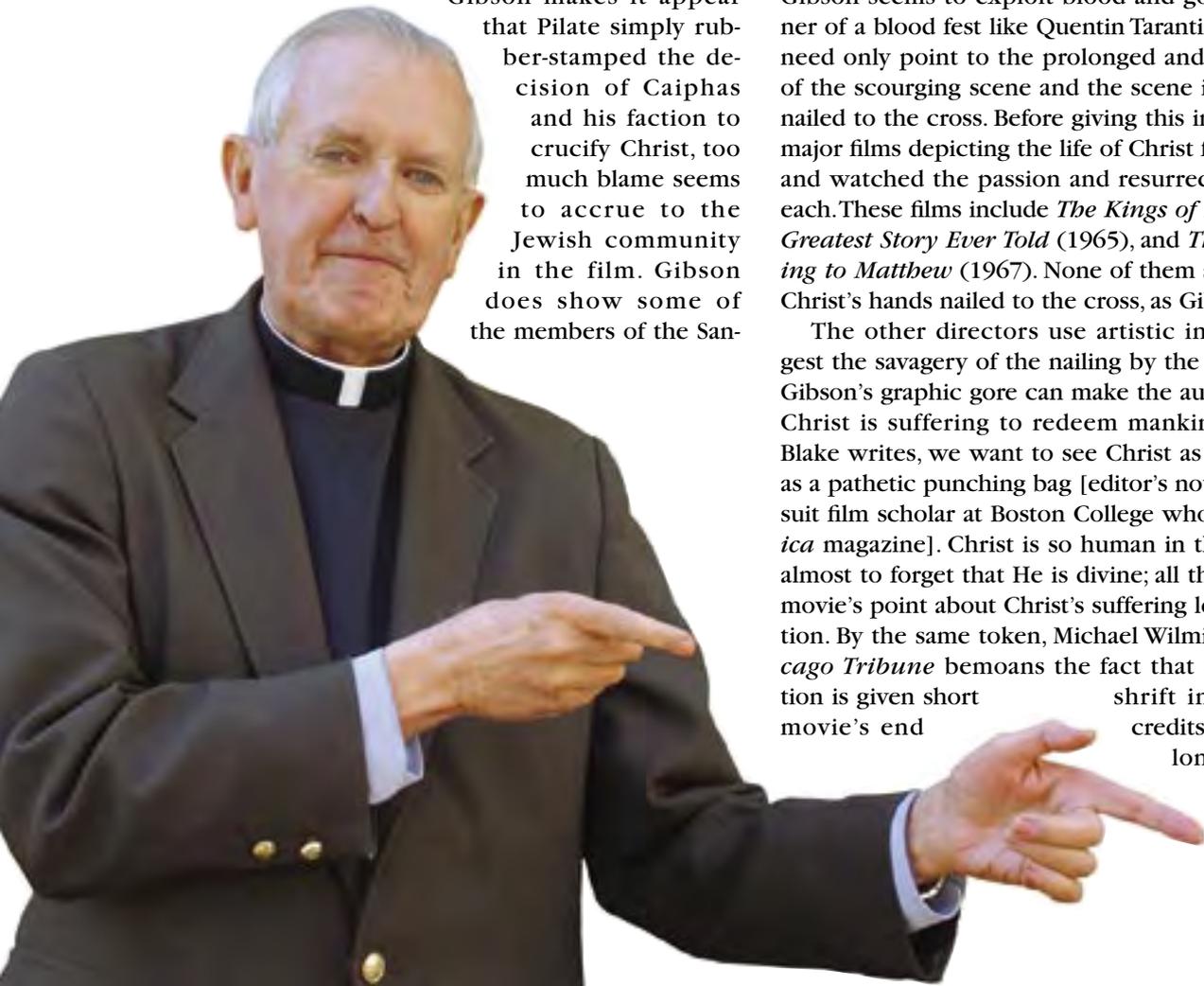
Gibson makes it appear that Pilate simply rubber-stamped the decision of Caiphas and his faction to crucify Christ, too much blame seems to accrue to the Jewish community in the film. Gibson does show some of the members of the San-

hedrin protesting Caiphas's handling of Christ's trial as a kangaroo court, but a lot of filmgoers missed this. The film opens with a quotation from Isaiah 53:5, "He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities." Although Gibson is an ultra-conservative Catholic (who does not accept many of the reforms of Vatican II), he does believe the church's position that Christ died to redeem mankind and that the sins of all mankind led to Christ's passion. But that message is not as clear as it should be in the film. And I can't blame our Jewish brethren for being sensitive to the way the Jews are presented in the films, since only in 1964, during the second Vatican Council, was the prayer for "the perfidious Jews" removed from the Good Friday liturgy—after it had been said for several centuries every Good Friday!

Q Some critics have received *The Passion of the Christ* favorably. Others have been less than favorable. What's your take on the film?

A I can't acquit Mel Gibson of the charge—made in reviews in the secular press as well as in the religious press—of making the film more violent and bloody than it had to be. Christ's scourging gets a few words in each Gospel, but Gibson spends nearly twenty minutes of screen time on it, showing layers of skin being ripped off in close-up by a metal-tipped whip. After twenty minutes Christ's pain loses its meaning. Gibson seems to exploit blood and gore after the manner of a blood fest like Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill*. One need only point to the prolonged and graphic violence of the scourging scene and the scene in which Christ is nailed to the cross. Before giving this interview, I got the major films depicting the life of Christ from a video store and watched the passion and resurrection segments of each. These films include *The Kings of Kings* (1961), *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), and *The Gospel According to Matthew* (1967). None of them show close-ups of Christ's hands nailed to the cross, as Gibson's film does.

The other directors use artistic indirection to suggest the savagery of the nailing by the use of long shots. Gibson's graphic gore can make the audience forget that Christ is suffering to redeem mankind. As Fr. Richard Blake writes, we want to see Christ as a tragic hero, not as a pathetic punching bag [editor's note: Fr. Blake is a Jesuit film scholar at Boston College who writes for *America* magazine]. Christ is so human in the film, He seems almost to forget that He is divine; all the gore blunts the movie's point about Christ's suffering leading to redemption. By the same token, Michael Wilmington in the *Chicago Tribune* bemoans the fact that Christ's resurrection is given short shrift in the movie. The movie's end credits run considerably longer than the res-



urrection scene! We see a discarded shroud and the risen Christ leaving the tomb in blazing light. This is not sufficient, Wilmington rightly states, to drive home the point that Christ has triumphed over death. The resurrection is presented as a private experience of Jesus, not shared with his disciples or anyone else, so Gibson misses the chance to offer us sinners hope. Moreover, there are only brief references, by way of short flashbacks, to Christ's healing ministry and preaching. So Gibson's film seems to assault the spirit with brutal violence, rather than to uplift it. In short, *The Passion of the Christ* never makes clear what all the bloodshed is about. This is an artistic failure on Gibson's part. Because the film is a superficial presentation of Christ's last hours, without a great deal of spiritual insight into the events that are being portrayed, Gibson has lost sight of the transfiguring power of art by downplaying Christ' resurrection.

Q Are there any other films, past or present that you feel have the power to yield a religious experience?

A Having just published a book on Francis Ford Coppola, his films *Godfather I* and *II* come to mind. Coppola told me "I decided to include some Catholic rituals in these movies, which are part of my Catholic heritage as a Sicilian-American. There is a Catholic wedding in *Godfather I* and a First Communion in *Godfather II*." The point is that the Mafia family, the Corleones, steadfastly ignore the spiritual import of these time-honored religious rituals. The sacraments of Holy Matrimony and Holy Communion do not touch their lives in any meaningful way. The Godfather in each case deploys Catholic ceremonies to legitimize their lifestyle. The films establish the "two" families depicted in the movies: the outer family of wives and children in a congenial atmosphere of religious celebrations, and the inner family comprising the men who conduct "the family business" behind closed doors. The spiritual food for thought in these two films for me is that anyone—not just a member of a Mafia family—can allow the religious practices in their lives to become empty rituals. One merely goes through the motions, without stopping to reflect on the true meaning of these ceremonies and how they should influence our lives. More than one student has told me that they go to Mass, for instance, to please their parents, not because the Mass touches them on any deep, personal level. I find that a little scary. In sum I think these two films demonstrate that the popular cinema can reflect spiritual values, in this case by showing us Catholics who no longer believe, but go through the motions of Catholic ceremonies, hoping that somehow they will do them some good. Coppola's continuing preoccupation with the importance of family in modern society is brought into relief in the present picture. As a matter of fact, the thing that most attracted Coppola to the project in the first place was that the book is



"I can't acquit Mel Gibson of the charge of making the film more violent and bloody than it had to be," says Gene Phillips, SJ, in front of the Village North Theater, directly across the street from Loyola University, where he teaches English.

really the story of a family. "It is about the father and his sons," he says, "and questions of power and succession." He sees the importance of the role of family spirit in people's lives; and that it is tied up, in turn, with a Catholic's membership in the Church, which is after all, a Christian family.

Another mainstream Hollywood film which has some spiritual content is William Wyler's *Ben Hur*. It deals with the title character, who encourages his people to resist the Roman occupation forces in Judea, during the time of Christ. Eventually Ben-Hur is convicted of treason and serves a term as a galley slave aboard a Roman ship. Later Ben-Hur happens upon Christ carrying his cross to Calvary to be crucified and keeps vigil at the foot of the cross as Christ dies. Afterward, Ben-Hur reflects that Christ prayed for his persecutors before he died; Christ's example in forgiving his enemies inspires Ben-Hur to relinquish his hatred of the Romans for the wrong things that they had done him. The sun rises, signaling the promise of dawn and renewed hope for the future. In the end Ben-Hur emerges as a heroic figure who has risen above his sufferings and learned to forgive the injustices done to him.

In any event, Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* will be released on home video in August, where it will be available forever, and be as successful as it was in the cinemas. Nothing succeeds like excess. ■