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**Bishop**

## CONTEMPLATING THE FACE OF CHRIST IN FILM

### **A HOLY WEEK 2004 PASTORAL LETTER FROM BISHOP MICHAEL SALTARELLI TO THE PEOPLE OF THE DIOCESE OF WILMINGTON**

#### *1. Contemplating the Face of Christ and the New Evangelization*

From the early days of the Church, the faith of the people of God has moved them to depict the face of Christ in art. This impulse arose, as all art does, from the human desire to create, to make something beautiful. Depictions of the mystery of the Incarnation also served as a means of inspiring, teaching and evangelizing. Drawings and mosaics, manuscript pages and stained glass, painting and sculpture, music and poetry all became what Pope John Paul II has called "genuine sources of theology" as artists brought forth new images of Christ to console God's people in every era.

In our day, film and television offer us an immediate and extraordinary means for imaging the face of Christ and communicating his Gospel to a global audience of both believers and non-believers. As the Holy Father has stated, "The Church would be remiss if she failed to take advantage of the great potential the modern means of communication offer to present the Mystery of Christ to the modern world."

During Holy Week, we are especially focused on the image of Christ in his most compelling posture as the Lamb of God as the Gospel readings from Palm Sunday and the Easter Triduum recall us to the Church's defining story of our Lord's Passion, Death and Resurrection. This year we have in our theaters two powerful films to supplement the Gospels of Holy Week. Mel Gibson's, *The Passion of the Christ* has drawn millions of people into contemplation of the Paschal Mystery and led them to a sense of horror for sin. The other film, drawn from JRR Tolkien's fantasy trilogy, *Lord of the Rings, The Return of the King*, presents a fundamental message of grace, sacrifice and salvation which also unmistakably points to Christ.

Both films invite us to explore the role film could have in the New Evangelization. As Pope John Paul II wrote in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, an encyclical issued last Holy Thursday: "To contemplate the face of Christ, and to contemplate it with Mary is the 'programme' which I have set before the Church at the dawn of the third millennium, summoning her to put out into the deep on the sea of history with the enthusiasm of the new evangelization. To contemplate Christ involves being able to recognize Him wherever

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He manifests Himself, in his many forms of presence...." (#4) The cinema, as we have come to understand, is one such form.

## 2. *Contemplating the Face of Christ in "The Passion of the Christ"*

We begin with the *The Passion of the Christ* -- a film that seared itself into the world's consciousness this Lent. My hope is that this film might help each of us to approach the narratives of all four Gospels with a greater sensitivity, reverence, and attention to detail. Each Gospel has its own unique portrait of the face of Christ. But they all follow the general sequence of Christ's life from his nativity and childhood to the mysteries of his public life and ministry. Each moves inexorably toward and culminates in his Passion, Death and Resurrection.

What filmmaker Gibson does so effectively in *The Passion of the Christ* is to interpret our Lord's life and public ministry through his experience of the Passion. Gibson intercuts the brutal unfolding of our Lord's suffering and death with flashbacks. While not all these scenes are recorded in the Gospels, every parent and every child can identify with the intimate scenes between Jesus with his Mother. Scenes from the Sermon on the Mount and from the Last Supper which are recorded by the evangelists are given a deep and complete meaning when intertwined with the Cross. As a work of art, Gibson's film calls us to interpret the events of our own lives through the lens of the Passion of Christ. Meditation on the suffering of Christ paradoxically leads us to true inner healing and the inner peace and freedom of repentance.

How is that accomplished when we view Gibson's film? Here are a few scenes that no doubt moved many to contemplate the Face of Christ more deeply:

- In the film Our Lady approaches Our Lord as he draws his last breath on the Cross. She kisses her Son's bloody feet and her own face is smeared with the Blood of her Son. In that incredible scene there is a whole theological reflection. Pope John Paul's description of Mary as "Woman of the Eucharist" can serve as a commentary: "Mary throughout her life at Christ's side and not only on Calvary, made her own *the sacrificial dimension of the Eucharist. The tragedy of her Son's crucifixion was thus foretold, and in some sense Mary's Stabat Mater* at the foot of the Cross was foreshadowed. In her daily preparation for Calvary, Mary experienced a kind of 'anticipated Eucharist' -- one might say a 'spiritual communion' -- of desire and of oblation, which would culminate in her union with her Son in his passion, and then find expression after Easter by her partaking in the Eucharist which the Apostles celebrated as the memorial of that passion." (#55)
- Veronica both in tradition and in the film has a contemplative focus on the face of Christ. As chaos and violence surround her, she continues to focus on the battered face of Christ. In a sense, she is a patroness for any Catholic who wants to contemplate the face of Christ more deeply. Her wiping of the face of Christ leaves an imprint on the cloth but even more deeply on her soul. She teaches us the value of spiritual concentration.
- Simon of Cyrene wants to maintain his stance as an innocent bystander who wants no part of carrying the Cross with Christ. He is literally joined at the hip to Our Lord as they

take the road to Golgotha together. Very soon we find that he has become immersed in the journey -- first defending Christ when the brutality escalates and then by his obvious desire and longing to stay with Christ after he has fulfilled his task. Simon of Cyrene teaches us about the powerful graces that enter our souls when we assist others in carrying the crosses of life especially at the moments when we ourselves are carrying heavy crosses.

- The Roman soldier who thrusts the spear into our Lord's side in the midst of the violent storm and earthquake has a transfiguration moment as he is physically sprayed with the Blood and Water from Christ's side. His journey on that day leads him from cruelty and mockery to belief and reverence.
- Finally, the brutality of the film, which has been the center of so much controversy, is itself a visual device to express saving truths about the inconceivable horror of sin, and the boundless love of God. For every sin is truly an act of violence against God. Only Divine Love could have powered Jesus to his feet over and over through the torment of pain and suffering that was the journey to Golgotha.

*The Passion of the Christ* also offers some of the most striking eucharistic imagery ever seen on the screen. One of the great themes of encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* is the Holy Father's emphasis on the sacrificial nature of the Mass: "The Eucharist is indelibly marked by the event of the Lord's passion and death, of which it is not only a reminder but the sacramental re-presentation. It is the sacrifice of the Cross perpetuated down the ages." (#11) The Holy Father has diagnosed that over the past few years, some in the Church have lost the sense of the reality that the Mass is the unbloody renewal of Christ's sacrifice on Calvary. Gibson's film makes this point visually by interspersing scenes of The Last Supper with scenes of the Crucifixion. We cannot leave this film without understanding that the Mass is both a sacred meal *and* the unbloody renewal of Christ's sacrifice.

### *3. Contemplating the Face of Christ in "The Lord of the Rings"*

Little did many of us suspect as we read *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy in our teenage and college years that this epic saga would become a cinematic blockbuster in the new millenium. Mysteriously, those of us with Catholic sensibilities always felt curiously at home with *The Lord of the Rings*. We eventually learned that JRR Tolkien was a passionate Roman Catholic and one of the literary *inklings* at Oxford with his friend the great Christian apologist C.S. Lewis.

Tolkien's middle earth world with all its fantasies, quests and creatures was always at its core informed by Roman Catholic philosophy and theology. From the transforming journey and sacrificial heroism of Frodo and Sam to the death and resurrection imagery surrounding the Wizard Gandalf, to the myriad lessons about fidelity, honor, courage, sacrifice, virtue and vice – a deeply Catholic sensibility pervades this fantasy universe.

Tolkien underscored this in a letter he wrote to his son near the end of his life: "Out of the darkness of my life, so much frustrated, I put before you the one great thing to love on earth: The Blessed Sacrament... There you will find romance, glory, honor, fidelity, and the true way of all your loves upon earth..." Just as the heroic love in the hearts of Frodo and Sam is refined in their journey to the fires

of Mordor, so our love is refined and purified when we eat "the Fire and the Spirit in the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ." (St. Ephrem)

Unlike previous generations, many in the present generation of young people will come to the *Lord of the Rings* first in its cinema form and perhaps later, we may hope, in its original book form. In either case, the genius and heart of Tolkien is perpetuated, thanks to the skill of filmmaker Peter Jackson. For all its charm and fantasy, *The Return of the King* and the previous two films, look unflinchingly at the challenges and rewards of Christian life. Nowhere is this stated, but to live like Frodo at his best is to embrace the Gospel of Jesus. If our children delight in this fantasy, emulate the virtues of its characters and forgive their failings, this film will evangelize them and prepare them for more acutely focused images of Christ as they grow into adult members of the Church.

#### *4. Contemplating the Face of Christ in the Radiant Faces of the Saints*

While recent films grab the headlines and the ticket sales, I would like to remind you of several classic films – some decades old – that still hold up and offer many insights for the challenges of this current moment. In particular there is a virtual library of films about saints. *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), *The Song of Bernadette* (1943), *Monsieur Vincent* (1947), *Becket* (1964), *A Man for All Seasons* (1966), *The Scarlet and the Black* (1983), *Therese* (1986), *Romero* (1989) are all examples of inspirational films about people of heroic sanctity and virtue.

*A Man for All Seasons* -- a film about the life and martyrdom of St. Thomas More -- is a film of exceptional quality based on the play and screenplay of Robert Bolt. *A Man for All Seasons* asks the question: to what extent is a person willing to be faithful to ideas, convictions and conscience no matter what the cost, even if that cost be one's life? In the European and Church crisis caused by Henry VIII's divorce and remarriage and the Church's refusal to compromise, the only two people who stood up for the Church's teaching and the Pope's authority to teach in matters of faith and morals were St. Thomas More and a bishop, St. John Fisher. Both More and Fisher were martyred. Both became saints.

In the scene where the executioner's axe is about to fall, Thomas More, played by the actor Paul Scofield, says to the crowd: "I die His Majesty's good servant, but God's first." Certainly, St. Thomas More, the patron saint of lawyers and politicians, emerges as a model for today's Catholic Christian public servant. Perhaps after seeing this film Catholics serving on the staffs or supporting the campaigns of pro-choice Catholic public servants will be moved to question the specious stance of someone who claims to be "personally opposed" to abortion and other affronts to the sanctity of human life, but who is unwilling to act to stop them.

I also offer to you this Holy Week, at this time of crisis for the priesthood and the Church, the image of an heroic priest from World War II. Based on a true story, the 1983 film *The Scarlet and the Black*, tells the story of Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty (played by Gregory Peck) is an enterprising Vatican Official who arranges a network of people in Rome to hide Jews from the Nazis. Colonel Kappler, the Nazi in charge of Rome (played by Christopher Plummer), is responsible for horrible atrocities in the city. They come into direct conflict which culminates in their confrontation in the moonlight at the Roman Coliseum.

In response to Kappler's request that O'Flaherty arrange safe

passage to Switzerland for his wife and children, O'Flaherty responds: "You've turned this city into a concentration camp. You've tortured and butchered my friends. You've violated every principle of God and man. How many murderous dictators have talked that kind of rubbish? Just look around you, Kappler. We're standing where your ancient friends entertained themselves by watching lions tear the Christians to pieces. But the Church remains. A lot of broken stones like these -- in a few years, that's all that will be left of your glorious Reich." The root theme is the power of this priest, this man of faith, to combat evil at great personal risk and to extend charity even to his worst enemy. The postscript to the film reads: "Herbert Kappler was sentenced to life in prison for war crimes. In the long years that followed in his Italian prison, Kappler had only one visitor. Every month, year in and year out, O'Flaherty came to see him. In 1959, the former head of the dreaded Gestapo in Rome was baptized into the Catholic faith at the hand of the Irish priest."

*A Man for All Seasons* and *The Scarlet and the Black* are just two examples of the power of film to portray a saint's life in history and to inspire people to present-day sanctity. In these heroes we see the face of Christ where it should be found unfailingly -- in the lives of those who profess our faith. The lives of the saints are full of dramatic possibilities. But it is one thing to conduct a canonization process and to eventually proclaim a saint in St. Peter's Square. It is another challenge to spread the saint's message and life so that the world can be inspired. Among the best ways to do it in the contemporary world is film.

I join the Holy Father in encouraging Catholic film artists and all film artists of good will -- producers, directors, screenwriters, etc. -- to tap this untapped resource of the lives of the saints so that humanity and the Church may be inspired by those who radically dedicate their lives to Jesus Christ. We need Catholic filmmakers to do for the lives of saints what Ken Burns did for the Civil War, Lewis and Clark, and the Brooklyn Bridge -- bring them into the living rooms of the general public. The outstanding cinematography and continuing universal appeal of *A Man for All Seasons* and the current raging success of *The Passion of the Christ* and *The Lord of the Rings* show that it is possible.

##### *5. Contemplating the Face of Christ in Film that is Implicitly Christian*

Like *The Lord of the Rings*, there are many films that while not explicitly Christian are implicitly Christian. Such films have enormous potential for evangelization in that they are a form of "pre-evangelization." They can show an audience how it feels to be a Christian, think like a Christian and act like a Christian without necessarily mentioning the name of Jesus Christ or invoking institutional religion. (In the world of theatre, T.S. Eliot used this method in such plays as *The Cocktail Party* and *The Family Reunion*. Eliot, an Anglican, could measure the response of a secular audience because he had been an agnostic himself. Writing drama for a society that rejected the notion of mixing Christianity and cocktail parties, he mixed them anyway and with success.)

The work of God is much larger than the outlook of a particular director or producer. God extends his grace to all, and may very well work through a virtuous and good-willed atheist or agnostic in ways that they never imagined. The Vatican Best Films List published on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of cinema in 1995 includes such implicitly Christian films as *Babette's Feast* (1988), *Chariots of Fire* (1981), *Gandhi* (1982), *Schindler's List*

(1993), *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Grand Illusion* (1937), *Napoleon* (1927), *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).

#### *6. The Face of Christ in Cinema and the New Evangelization in the 21st Century*

In this letter I have touched on a small selection of feature films. There are also documentaries and films made for television. And each of you know which films have touched your hearts and made you turn to the Lord more devoutly. What is abundantly evident this Holy Week 2004 is that the Face of Christ is being revealed in cinema in the modern world. Film is the ultimate communications medium for the New Evangelization in the 21st century.

With this reality in mind, I offer these recommendations:

1. The literature departments of our Catholic high schools should consciously develop film criticism skills in our Catholic students. Students should be taught to be discerning about film themes, plot, structure, acting and visual imagery. They should especially be discerning about the subtext messages of films communicated by the sequence of images and the interaction of characters. They should be able to identify films with messages that are alien to the Gospel and be able to discuss why. They should be able to discern the Face of Christ in films that are both explicitly and implicitly Christian and use the discussion of these films as an instrument of evangelization.
2. I encourage parishes and diocesan offices to sponsor film festivals and film studies that expose Catholics to the 1995 Vatican list of Best Films and other films that are wholesome, cultural, meaningful and that have eternal significance. Local Catholic organizations and small groups should occasionally show a film at their meetings or go to the theater together and afterward discuss the film. Likewise I encourage youth ministers in our parishes and teachers in our schools to use films in their work with our young people. I especially urge parents to go to the theater with their children and to watch films in the home and talk about them as a family.
3. I believe the Holy See's Congregation for the Causes of Saints could study how best to harness the power of men and women saints through history by presenting them in the medium of film and documentary with the best scripts and cinematographic technique possible. We as a local and a universal Church need to be proactive about sharing the stories of how Jesus Christ works in history through the lives of the saints.
4. Finally, I want to join with the Holy Father – who himself performed as an actor and who gave himself to be an instrument of Christ's communication on the stage of the world – in encouraging the work of Catholic Christian artists and all artists of good will in the Diocese of Wilmington. May your artistic creations be the result of an intense union with Jesus Christ. At Mass, the priest prays in the Preparation of the Gifts: "Blessed are You Lord God of all creation, through

Your goodness we have this Bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made it will become for us the Bread of Life." May the creative work of your minds, your hands and your hearts be nourished by your reception of the Bread of Life.

May the Lord bless you and your families this Holy Week and Easter Season as we discern together the Face of Christ in film and rejoice in His glory.

Most Rev. Michael A. Saltarelli

Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Wilmington

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