

"Jesus of Nazareth in the Movies"

Ever since Cecil B. DeMille's 1927 silent classic "King of Kings," films about biblical subjects have stirred up debate and controversy. This is due in part to the fact that so many people have definite opinions about how stories from Scripture should be visualized. It comes as no surprise that "The Passion of the Christ" has prompted lively debate. Some have said it is a masterpiece, the best religious movie ever made, completely faithful to the New Testament, destined to inspire and deepen faith. Others have said that it is marred by the prolonged scenes of excruciating violence, departures from the New Testament, and anti-Semitic stereotypes. Still others say there is truth in both points of view. If you have seen the film, what do you think? It is my hope that those who do see it will not become entangled in debating a film but be drawn closer to the face of Christ revealed in the Gospels themselves.

To this end my friend and brother Bishop, The Most Reverend Michael Saltarelli, Bishop of Wilmington, Del. has recently published a pastoral letter, "Contemplating the Face of Christ in Film." He reflects on "The Passion of the Christ" and the Academy Award winning "The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King." He highlights the ways in which he thinks the explicit Christian narrative of the former and implicit Christian narrative of the latter can contribute to further reflection.

I hope you will find the excerpts of Bishop Saltarelli's letter which follow a helpful way of entering into the spiritual world views dramatized in motion pictures. *The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, Bishop of Lake Charles.*

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 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 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 Jesus' life and public ministry through His experience of the Passion. Gibson intercuts the brutal unfolding of Jesus' 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 Mary approaches Jesus 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 Jesus of Nazareth 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 representation. 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"*

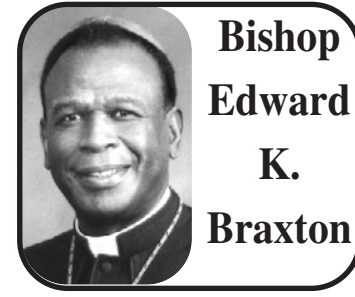
Little did many of us suspect as we read *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy in our teenage and college years that this epic saga would become a cinematic blockbuster in the new millennium. Mysteriously, those of us with Catholic sensibilities always felt curiously at home with *The Lord 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.

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. 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.



Bishop Edward K. Braxton

Third Sunday of Easter

At that time, Jesus revealed himself again to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. He revealed himself in this way. Together were Simon Peter, Thomas called Didymus, Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, Zebedee's sons, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We also will come with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. When it was already dawn, Jesus was standing on the shore; but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, have you caught anything to eat?" They answered him, "No." So he said to them, "Cast the net over the right side of the boat and you will find something." So they cast it, and were not able to pull it in because of the number of fish. So the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord." When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he tucked in his garment, for he was lightly clad, and jumped into the sea. The other disciples came in the boat, for they were not far from shore, only about a hundred yards, dragging the net with the fish. When they climbed out on shore, they saw a charcoal fire with fish on it and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you just caught." So Simon Peter went over and dragged the net ashore full of one hundred fifty-three large fish. Even though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come, have breakfast." And none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they realized it was the Lord. Jesus came over and took the bread and gave it to them, and in like manner the fish. This was now the third time Jesus was revealed to his disciples after being raised from the dead. When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He then said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was distressed that he had said to him a third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." (Jesus) said to him, "Feed my sheep. Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." He said this signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when he had said this, he said to him, "Follow me."



John 21:1-19

Home Missions Appeal this weekend in Diocese

WASHINGTON -- The Catholic Home Missions Appeal, which helps home mission dioceses in the United States carry out their work of preaching the Gospel, will award \$11.9 million in grants this year, the highest total in its seven-year history.

That's the good news. The not so good news is that the annual collection, while successful, is not keeping pace with the needs of these dioceses, according to Bishop J. Peter Sartain of Little Rock, Chairman of the Committee on the Home Missions.

Bishop Sartain said that the Home Missions Appeal has continued to be successful because of the faithfulness and sustained generosity of the Catholic people. "At the same time, the national economic slowdown and troubles in the Church have eroded the financial position of mission dioceses, which had scant reserves to begin with," he said.

"Strengthening the Church at Home" is the theme for the appeal, which will be taken up in Catholic parishes around the country, including here in the Diocese of Lake Charles, Saturday and Sunday April 24-25. During fiscal 2004-2005, the

Diocese of Lake Charles will receive a total of \$180,000.00 from the Committee on the Home Missions, according to the Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, Bishop of Lake Charles.

Many Catholics may not know what a "home mission" is, or that 90 U.S. dioceses in rural America, from Appalachia to the Mountain West, rely on the Appeal for parish support, religious education, youth ministry, and work with growing populations of Hispanic Americans, African Americans, Asians and Native Americans.

World Day of Prayer for Vocations May 2

LAKE CHARLES - World Day of Prayer for Vocations will be celebrated at the 9:30 a.m. Liturgy on Sunday, May 2 at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton will be the celebrant.

Priest, Religious and Deacons, observing anniversaries of 10, 25, 40, 50 and 60 or more years will be honored.

A reception will follow in the Pastoral Center located at 414 Iris Street.

(This page paid for by the Diocese of Lake Charles.)