

The Untold Story Behind *The Passion of the Christ*

In Defense of Mel Gibson

by Alberto Carosa

What could a world-famous multibillionaire Hollywood star like Mel Gibson have in common with an unknown, cash-strapped, freelance journalist based in Rome? Virtually nothing, it would seem. Yet there is a common denominator: We are both Catholics and cherish the traditional Latin Mass, the primary liturgy of the Church before its post-Vatican II transformation into the vernacular “Novus Ordo” rite. The pre-Vatican II Latin Mass is also called the Tridentine Mass, after the Council of Trent (1545-1563), which codified the ancient Roman rite in its present form.

One reason I prefer the traditional Latin liturgy is that it prompted my wife’s conversion to the Catholic faith from the Lutheran church. She used to wonder whether there was any real difference between the Novus Ordo Mass and the Lutheran service of her childhood. I believe that her conversion was the clear sign that she was the woman God had chosen for me, as I was the man He chose for her. (Contrary to current belief, in fact, the traditional Catholic principle is that marriages are not decided by us but by God, and, if too many marriages today go awry, it is precisely because of the mistaken belief that one may choose one’s spouse while ignoring God’s will. The difference is obvious: God does not make mistakes in His choices, whereas human beings do.)

My initial acquaintance with Mel Gibson dates as far back as 1996, when, through a series of unexpected connections and coincidences, I ended up being privileged to act as his translator. I saw him again after a couple of years on the occasion of his youngest child’s confirmation, which was administered by a traditional-minded bishop who lived on the outskirts of Rome. And when, in late 2002, I read that Gibson was about to start shooting a film in Italy on the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, I thought that it would be nice to see him again.

For obvious reasons, Mel Gibson is not a person who is easy to get a hold of, and, normally, it is best for him to establish contact at his convenience; for example, when he needs something that, for one reason or another, he is not able to procure. Can one seriously think, however, that there might be something he is not able to procure? My pessimism was proved wrong, though, and what happened is a typical case of reality going well beyond even the most fanciful of imaginations.

Gibson telephoned in the early fall of 2002, and we had a lengthy and pleasant conversation. The call came a couple of days after I had received a strange e-mail asking for help. I was about to delete the message—the sender was unknown to me, though I subsequently found out that he was Gibson’s assistant—but the subject line mentioned the need of a traditional priest for Mel Gibson.

Gibson needed to find a priest willing to celebrate the traditional Latin Mass daily on the set throughout the shooting of his film, including during an extended stay in Matera in Southern Italy. This request was being made not only for him, but on behalf of others involved in the production of the film, first and foremost the actor who played Jesus, James Caviezel (whom, to my delight, I found to be among the devout traditional-minded faithful).

My response to Gibson was very clear: I explained that it was not impossible to find a priest, but probably somewhat difficult and certainly time-consuming, especially with regard to Matera. I pledged, however, that I would not leave one single stone unturned in order to accommodate his needs.

Finding a priest to say the Tridentine Mass on the set in the Cinecittà studios in Rome would not have been all that difficult; the real problem was Matera. Obviously, he would have to be a retired priest without regular parish commitments—and one willing to move there for at least a couple of months. Where could I possibly find such a priest? My old friend Juan Miguel Montes came up with a brilliant idea: Why not ask those Vatican-approved traditional congregations to which a number of elderly and retired priests are usually attached? The solution came after I contacted Msgr. Gilles Wach, prior general of the Institute of Christ the King, Sovereign Priest, a traditional Latin Rite congregation based in Gricigliano (near Florence). In a subsequent meeting held at the Institute’s premises in Rome, Monsignor Wach, Gibson, and I agreed: The Institute’s Abbé (in the French sense of *father*, not *abbot*) Michel Debourges would be asked to serve as chaplain in Matera.

This solution could not have been more fitting, considering that Abbé Michel Debourges had worked for many years in theater (notably with Jean Vilar), cinema, and television before discovering, albeit belatedly, that he had a priestly vocation. Monsignor Wach, his superior, reached him at his home in Montpellier, inviting him to fly to Rome and then be driven by limousine to Matera.

While Father Debourges was “a priest” associated with Mel Gibson’s project and one of the three traditional priests involved in the offering of a daily Tridentine Mass for the film, he and the other two priests were each described in the media as “the priest” behind Gibson’s Mass. I had to deal with each of them, however, because I was responsible for arranging a suitable venue for the Sunday Mass, since the Cinecittà studios would be closed.

There is an interesting *Chronicles* connection to the chaplaincy performed by Abbé Debourges: The Institute of Christ the King, Sovereign Priest’s first church in the United States is in Rockford, Illinois, the home to this magazine and its publisher, The Rockford Institute. Rockford should be proud to house the congregation that provided a priest whose traditional religious

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service contributed to the supernatural protection and blessing that allowed the film to win success around the world.

In fact, the overwhelming success of the film should be seen in light of the overflowing graces granted by the traditional Latin Mass, all the more so for those who are not afraid to show their allegiance to it. Even if these elementary and simple concepts are difficult for most of our contemporaries to grasp, they are no less true and effectively epitomized in the Gospel, in which Our Lord proclaims: "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His Justice and everything else will be given unto you." To seek first the Kingdom of God means foremost to render true glory to Him. Indeed, during their interview with EWTN, Mel Gibson and Jim Caviezel said that their intention was to glorify God. What greater glory than to reproduce His Passion as faithfully as possible? Now, the very experts who predicted the film would be a financial disaster must admit that Gibson will net several hundred million dollars in the United States and Europe alone. Isn't this the "everything else" referred to above?

That *The Passion of the Christ* "is considered the most un-Hollywood of Hollywood movies" is a testament to the profound and solid faith of Mel Gibson.

I could never forget seeing, at Sunday Mass in Rome, Mel Gibson dressed as an altar boy with his white surplice and black robe (an attire that perfectly suited him) and watching him following the priest in procession from the sacristy toward the altar. Among other attendees that day were Jim Caviezel, producer Steve McEveete (also a coproducer of *The Lord of the Rings* series), and other actors and members of the cast of a wide variety of backgrounds and nationalities. This time, it was all for real, and the "set" was an old, small Catholic church in the ancient heart of the Eternal City.

I would rather not disclose the name of this church, which might still be used on future occasions, but the other two priests who served during the Rome shooting of the film were British-born Canadian Fr. Stephen Somerville and another Frenchman, Fr. Jean-Marie Charles-Roux. Born in London to devoutly Catholic parents, Father Somerville moved to Canada when he was two, attending seminary school at the Grand Séminaire of Quebec in 1952. He has served in parishes across southern Ontario and studied theology in Rome. A former member of the advisory board of the International Commission on English Liturgy, Father Somerville retired as a priest of the archdiocese of Toronto in 2002 (partly in protest of the many distortions made in the translations of liturgical texts from Latin into English), just in time to accept Gibson's flattering invitation to come to Rome to celebrate Mass in late 2002 and early 2003. "I once told Mel you're spending \$25 million to create a simulation of the crucifixion," the 72-year-old priest said, "when I can do the same thing in half an hour" (referring to his God-given priestly power to turn bread and wine into the Body and

Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ).

The other priest, French-born Jean-Marie Charles-Roux, is an old Rosminian father, headquartered in the curia of his congregation, the College of the Rosminian Fathers, near the Roman-era Caracalla Baths. In a chapel there, he can still offer his daily Mass in the traditional Roman rite. Apparently, Father Charles-Roux, who celebrates the 50th anniversary of his priestly ordination this year, has never used the *Novus Ordo* rite for Mass.

The son of the French ambassador to the Holy See in the years leading up to World War II, Father Charles-Roux himself joined the French diplomatic corps as a *chargé d'affaires*, before realizing that he had a priestly vocation. He spent more than 40 years in London as parish priest of the 13th-century St. Etheldreda's Church, the oldest Roman Catholic church in Britain.

Father Charles-Roux has a sister, Cyprienne del Drago, 86, who is the widow of Prince Marcello del Drago. After retiring, he decided to come to Rome to be close to his sister. His relations with and keen interest in the Italian and European nobility are reflected not only in the vast selection of books on British and French royalty in his cell at the Rosminian college but by his participation in the solemn Requiem Mass in the Cathedral of Saint-Denis in Paris on June 8, 2004, to bury, after over 200 years, the mortal remains (consisting only of a pickled heart) of the ten-year-old King Louis XVII. The son of King Louis XVI and Queen Marie-Antoinette, who were guillotined by the French revolutionaries, he died on June 8, 1795, after having been locked in Paris' Temple, a filthy prison, for three years. What the boy endured was another passion, at the hands of the French revolutionaries: He was brainwashed, with captors forcing him to sing revolutionary songs and curse his mother's memory. He spent months alone in a darkened tower, with nobody to wash him or to clean his cell. After two centuries of mystery surrounding the boy's fate, DNA tests have convinced many historians that the relic passed secretly from person to person was truly the royal heart.

Among Father Charles-Roux's closest acquaintances are Princess Margaret; Princess Marina, who was duchess of Kent and the daughter of Prince Nicholas of Greece and Denmark; and Italy's last king, Umberto II, and his wife, Marie Jose. Ten years ago, when the duchess of Kent joined the Catholic Church, becoming the first member of the royal family to convert to Catholicism in more than 300 years, Father Charles-Roux was reported by the BBC (January 14, 1994) as saying that many were not happy with the direction the Anglican Church was taking, especially with regard to women's ordination: "There's been a major change in their tradition and the people who belong to that tradition go back to what they are familiar with," he said. "They look for support in Rome." Gibson came to know Father Charles-Roux through the BBC, when, in a brief interview, he defended the Latin Mass.

The three priests who celebrated the Tridentine Mass for the film director and his cast unanimously praise Mel Gibson as a man of real and intense faith, who does nothing to conceal it. He was the first to join them in their daily Masses, always devoutly and humbly acting as altar boy. "When he kneels and sits before God," noted Father Somerville, "he's just like all the others." I, too, was impressed by his staunch faith.

That is why I cannot but burst into laughter whenever I read that one of Gibson's detractors has accused him of simply wanting to make lots of money, hinting that his film's success is the

outcome of a superbly planned marketing strategy. Why didn't they voice their accusations before, while the film was still being shot and Mel Gibson had to endure scathing attacks, blistering criticism, and enormous pressures (and even threats) from all sides? When all sorts of stormy petrels and prophets of doom were vying to predict a financial disaster? As a result of these attacks, studios refused to distribute a subtitled film performed in "dead" languages (Latin and Aramaic), Gibson's financial supporters backtracked, and he had to provide \$30 million out of his own pocket to complete the project.

On other occasions, my laughter has been replaced by indignation, especially in considering the case of Italian novelist Umberto Eco, 72, who moved out of the realm of semiotics to become a worldwide literary sensation with *The Name of the Rose* in 1980. He may be a best-selling academic and author, but, in his review of *The Passion* in *L'Espresso* (April 22, 2004), he clearly demonstrates his ignorance: "The Passion is a film which wants to make much money by offering so much blood and so much violence," he opined, adding that "Gibson's hatred against the Nazarene must be unspeakable." The opposite is true, however, and Gibson told me personally that he wanted to show what Jesus really suffered, which had, in all previous films, been too unrealistically portrayed. Moreover, as the media have often reported, the film was motivated by Gibson's gratitude, since his meditations on the Passion helped him restore order in his life.

A liberal secularist to the core, Eco is a typical emissary of an establishment that may tolerate Maundy Thursday but always flatly rejects Good Friday, as Father Charles-Roux stated in a recent interview.

As a son of the 1968 libertarian revolution, Eco reflects the

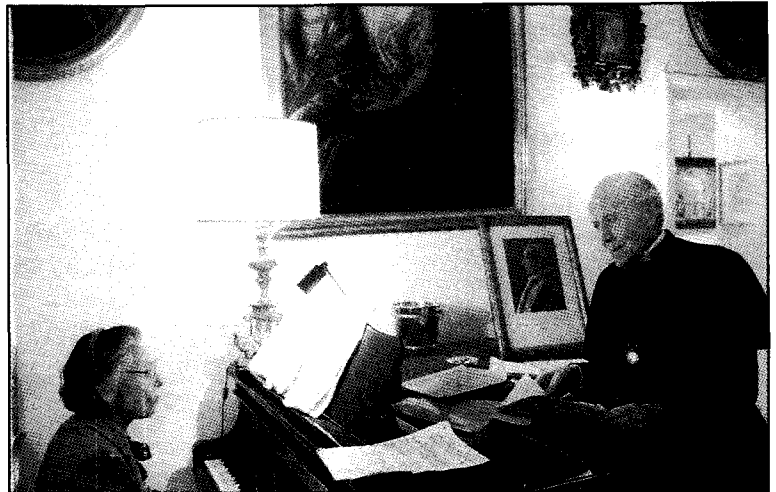


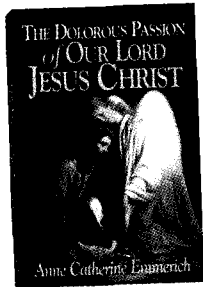
Photo courtesy of Alberto Carosa

Fr. Jean-Marie Charles-Roux with his sister.

"American way of life," a hedonistic and materialistic mind set perfectly incarnated by some of the most celebrated icons of the 60's—James Dean, Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe. The driving force behind this ethos is Hollywood, yet ironically Gibson, a Hollywood actor, has, through his film, offered a powerful weapon against the moral decay Hollywood continues to foster and spread. That *The Passion of the Christ* "is considered the most un-Hollywood of Hollywood movies" (as CNN described it) is a testament not only to the outstanding courage but also the profound and solid faith of Mel Gibson, a faith born of, and nurtured by, the traditional Mass of the ages.

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Thomas Fleming and Mother Teresa: Undoubted Motives in the Morality of Everyday Life

by Hugh Barbour, O.Praem.

"Name one."

—Anonymous

**The Morality of Everyday Life:
Rediscovering an Ancient Alternative
to the Liberal Tradition**

by Thomas Fleming

Columbia, MO: University of Missouri
Press; 270 pp., \$44.95



Too bad that, since 1966, they are no longer adding titles to the *Index of Prohibited Books*. My more than ten years as diocesan *ensor librorum*—was it this past distinction that gained me the happy task of writing this review?—would lead me to grant Thomas Fleming's *The Morality of Everyday Life: Rediscovering an Ancient Alternative to the Liberal Tradition* an *imprimatur* after a few nugatory adjustments, but what a book such as this really needs is a condemnation. Let me explain. A place on the Inquisition's *Index* would recommend this text to three groups of potential readers. The first are readers who already are in sympathy with the author's sound principles. They would compare him to the soon-to-be-Blessed (imagine the Church of the 22nd century giving this honor to Dr. Fleming! Stranger things have happened since Pentecost A.D. 33) Antonio Rosmini-Serbati, whose *Five Wounds of Holy Church*, a work of similar courage and good sense, was later removed from the list of offending texts. The second are those liberals who would in principle support the diffusion of any work that was the victim of censorship. (They might even get *The*

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Morality of Everyday Life in major bookstore windows, with reviews in *America*.) The third group needs most of all to read this book. They are well-meaning old movement conservatives and neoconservatives, the folks who read publications that depend for matters of social ethics on authors whose works figure on the *Index*, like Locke, Hume, Comte, Acton, and Mill. So, if you read *National Review* without being outraged, or *First Things*, or even *Latin Mass*, then get your confessor to let you read *The Morality of Everyday Life*.

The penitential context for reading this work is most apposite to Dr. Fleming's main thesis, since he calls for a return to premodern casuistry in the evaluation of the morality of human acts, a casuistry whose apogee, after centuries of development, was the 18th-century *Theologia Moralis* of St. Alphonsus

Liguori, whose method he judges "a mature and humane approach to moral problems that has never been equaled." This book of informal essays, written in a style that is accessible to the casual reader while remaining intellectually sumptuous, has, as its main thesis, that genuine moral reasoning

is based on two principles: first, that there are general and universally applicable moral laws governing human conduct; second, that these laws may not be applied simplistically and uniformly to the great variety of human circumstances and situations.

The subtitle, *Rediscovering an Ancient Alternative to the Liberal Tradition*, however, should make clear that this set of essays is not merely a serene, positive exposition of this thesis but, more importantly, a rhetorical refutation of the opposing rationalist ethics that both dogged post-Cartesian "mere conservatism" and willingly accompanied post-Kantian revolutionary voluntarism, while having perhaps the most plausible success with their milder ally, Anglo-American utilitarian empiricism. Dr. Fleming shows a wide acquaintance with the principal texts of this modern philosophical tradition in ethics, yet his greatest strength lies in his domination of classical and vernacular literature in finding the *loci* most adapted to his arguments. Add to this a keen eye for the realities of ordinary family and professional life and the surrealities of contemporary social and political relations, and you have the concrete synthesis (almost a redundancy!) that I have just de-