

# The Passion of The Christ

## A Film Review

By Rev. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy



**T**he *Passion of The Christ*, produced and directed by Mr. Mel Gibson, is the single finest cinematic representation of the nonviolent Jesus of the Gospels and His Way of nonviolent love of friends and

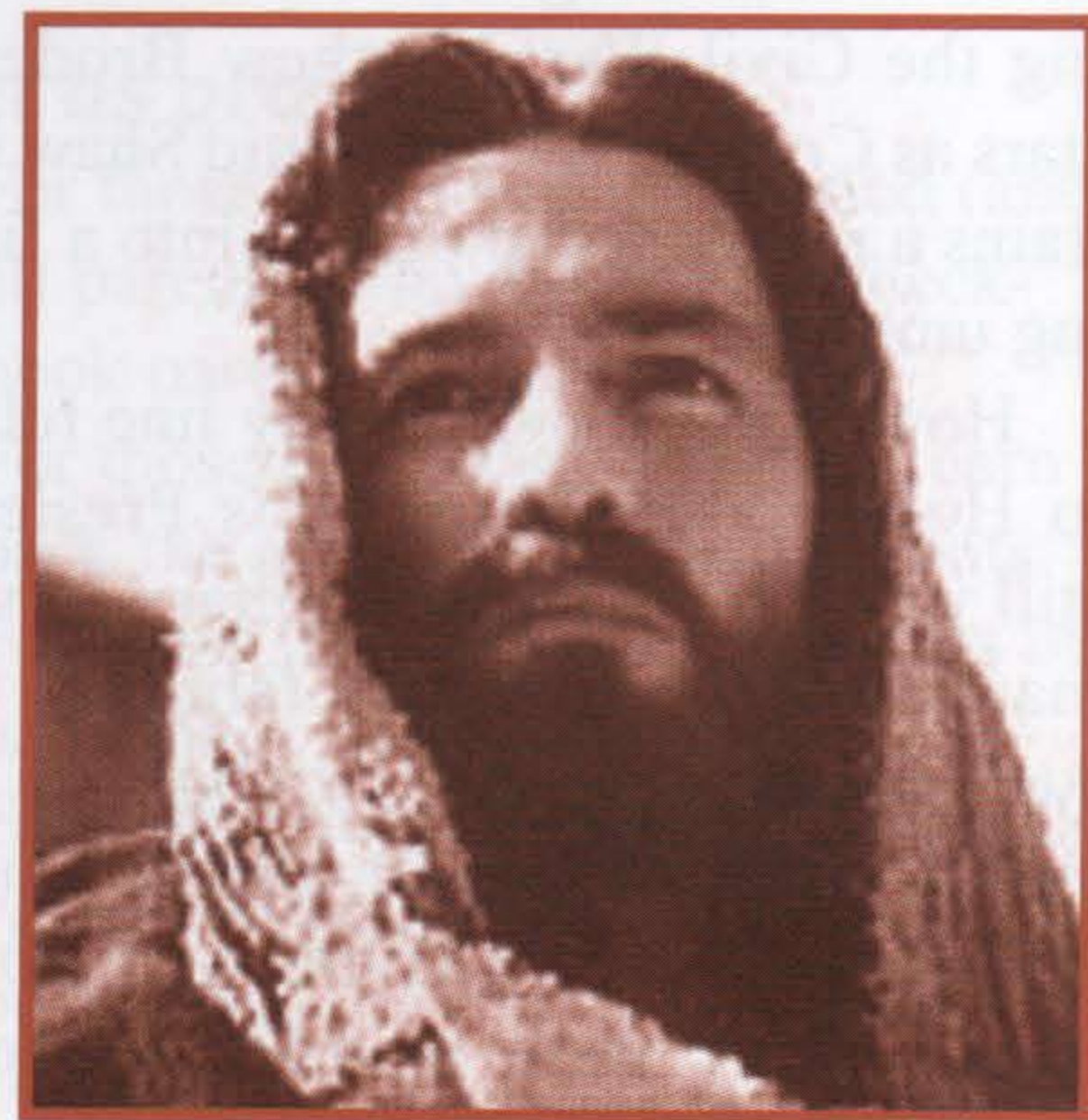
enemies ever presented to the consciousness of humanity. As soon as it is available on DVD, I shall begin to employ it as a pedagogical tool to illustrate and to illuminate in adult religious education classes that love which the New Testament teaches is divine and salvific, namely nonviolent merciful love toward all in the Family of God.

Because of the various commentaries I had read in newspapers and had heard on television prior to viewing this film, I worried that *The Passion of The Christ* might be a high tech rehashing of a theory of atonement which taught that salvation was achieved by the means of enduring raw animal pain. It was not! It most definitely was not! *The Passion of The Christ* was about love—not Caesarian love, not Aristotelian love, not Platonic love, not nationalistic or ethnic love, not Hollywood love. It was about Christic love. That is, it was about the love that Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, was ordained by Love Itself to reveal and to bestow on humanity by His words and deeds, for its temporal good and its eternal salvation. It was about the only kind of love, the only kind of power, that can conquer evil, vanquish death, bring peace and lead one and all to an eternally graced union with God. It was about the omnipotence of Christ-like love and the omnipotent God who is love (agapé).

The heart of each of the four Gospels is its Passion narrative. All the Gospels are constructed around this event. Why? Are the other stories about Jesus, e.g., His healings or His teachings, irrelevant or of minor importance. Of

course not. But, the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus present all the major truths of Jesus' life and ministry in their most incarnationally vivid, powerful and authoritative form. Nothing discloses the truth of a truth like living it. For example, Jesus teaches that His followers are to "Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful" (lk 6:36), that they are to love their enemies (mt 5:44, lk 6:27), that He wants from them "mercy not sacrifice" (mt 9:13), that they are to put up their swords (mt 26:53), that mercy is the standard of judgment at the end of time (mt 25:31-46). All of these teachings are embodied, proclaimed and made incarnationally luminous to the nth degree in the Passion.

While the violence in this film is ferocious, it is nevertheless an understatement of the suffering that would have been inflicted upon a person by the Roman crucifixion process. To complete the picture of death by crucifixion that *The Passion of The Christ* presents, one would have to view the documentary, *How Jesus Died: The Last 18 Hours* (1994, Trinity Pictures). In this film historians, archeologists and forensic pathologists with impeccable scholarly credentials, as well as the late Dr. John Bonica, the world's most renowned medical authority on pain, spell out the modes and mechanisms of the intolerable suffering that necessarily accompanies crucifixion—much of which Mr. Gibson chose not to lay bare in his film. It has become a cliché of critics of *The Passion of The Christ* to say, "The film's violence is over the top." It might be "over the top" for those who prefer their wars, abortions and capital punishment executions to be kept out of sight or at least at a tastefully abstract distance. But for those who want to know conceptually





and emotionally what real violence against a human being is and why Jesus rejects it as the Father's Will, this film is a significant step on the road of *conscientization*—on the road that leads from a destructively “naïve awareness” of a socially imposed consciousness to a “critical awareness” that gives birth to the imperative of non-violent love in a transformed conscience.

*The Passion of The Christ*, if allowed a full hearing, is a mighty manifesto as to why Jesus unequivocally renounces the perverted and perverting reality of violence. If heroin is thought to be no more dangerous than sugar, then it is theologically a slam-dunk to develop an ethic that justifies in the name of God and reason the sale of heroin to children. However, unlike films where violence is heroically glorified, or validated by being a supposed method of conflict resolution, or sanitized so as not to offend the sensitive psyche, the film *The Passion of The Christ*, in conformity with the actual Passion of Christ, exposes the spirit of violence in all its heinous ugliness—a heinous ugliness that reigns supreme whether the violence is legal or illegal, romantic or sordid, justified or unjustified, Marxist or capitalist, or whether the person engaging in it is using it to serve Yahweh, Jesus, Allah, Vishnu, the nation-state, the ethnic group or just plain old personal and group self-interest. Is the film “over the top” *vis a vis* violence? Not if the issue is historical and physical accuracy. Is it revealing? Most revealing. One of the many values of *The Passion of The Christ* is that it brings to light for the average First-World mind, media-drenched as it is in the delusion of the acceptability, the romance and even the holiness of violence, why Jesus absolutely had to reject it as a form of love, as a means of doing God's Will, as a method for accomplishing His mission and as part of His Way. Given the chance, *The Passion of The Christ* can teach us why Jesus had to categorically confront violence with nonviolent merciful love—and only with nonviolent merciful love.

To Mr. Gibson's credit he does not try to water-down the countercultural teachings of Jesus in his film. In fact he artistically highlights them via flashbacks to the “Love your enemies” section of the Sermon on the Mount and to the new commandment, “Love one another as I have loved you” (jn 13:34), section of the Last Supper. He also spotlights into prominence central countercurrent teachings of Jesus by creatively orchestrating the scenes where Jesus heals the ear of the armed servant of the high priest

who has come to take Him to His death, orders Peter to cease and desist immediately from defensive lethal combat, and struggles over and over again unto His last breath to intercede with the Father to forgive those who are destroying Him. To those who say that this film is flawed because it concentrates on Christ's passion while ignoring His teachings, I say, “See the film again.”

*Quo Vadis* is another Christ-centered film, but from another era. Cinematically it is a third-rate B-movie. However it is based on the novel, *Quo Vadis*, written by the Nobel Laureate in Literature, Henri Sienkiewicz. The author James Michener says of the book: “Sienkiewicz wrote *Quo Vadis* for the entire world and the world took it to its heart.” It is the most read novel of the Twentieth

Century, having been translated into 40

languages. At one point in the story,

St. Peter speaking to a group

of Christians—who are within

hours of being sent to their

deaths in the *Circus Maximus*

during Nero's reign of ter-

ror—explains to them that

[I]t's not enough to love

just one's own kind; God

died a man's death on the

cross, he spilled his blood

for all mankind, and even

the pagans are turning

towards him now... And it's not

enough to love only those who love

and treat you well. Christ forgave his

executioners. He removed all blame from the Jews

who turned him over to Roman justice to be cruci-

fied and from the Roman soldiers who nailed him to

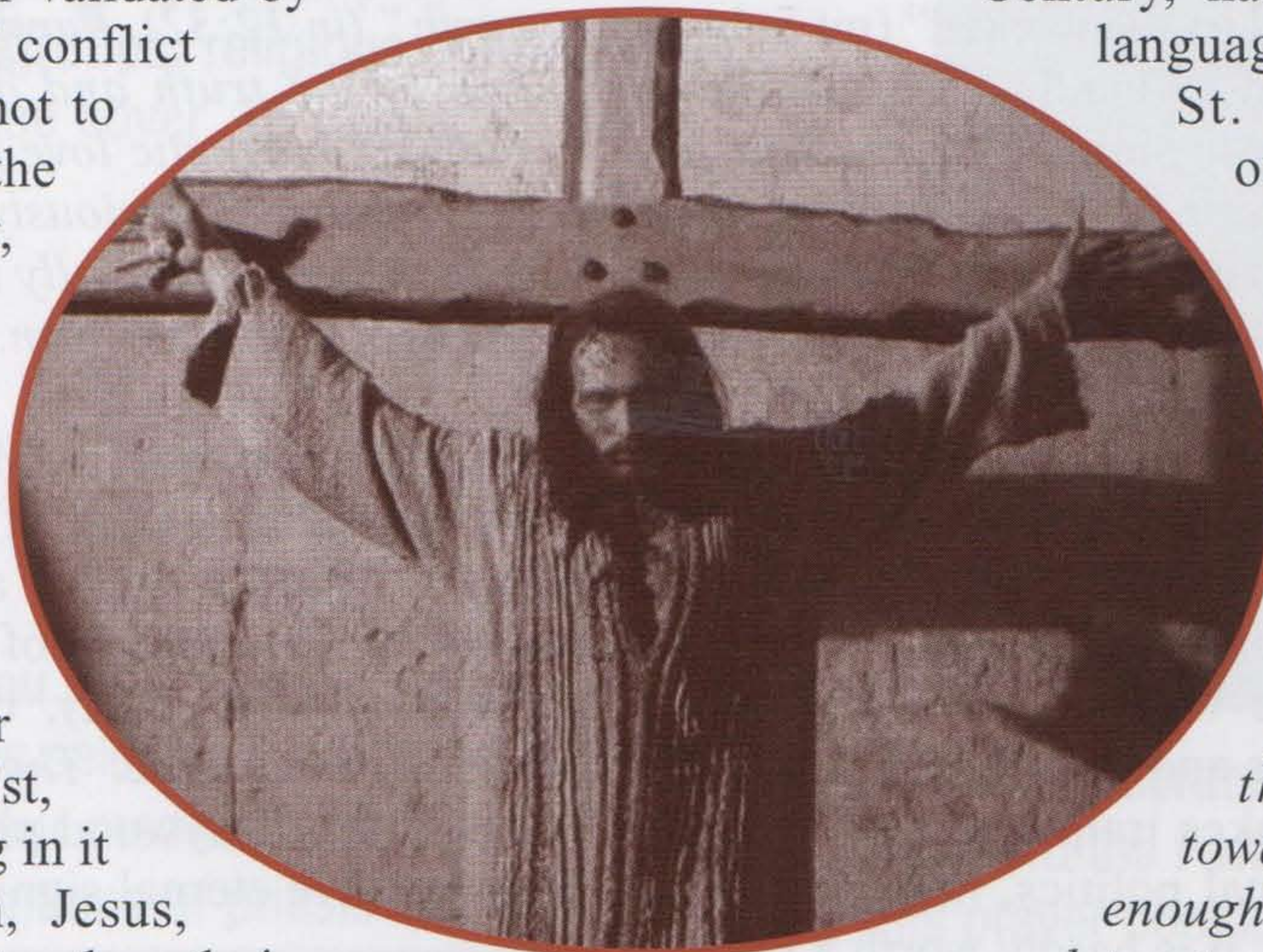
the cross...”Only love is more powerful than

hatred,” the teacher said simply. “Only love can

clean the world of evil.”

Unbeknownst to Peter and the other Christians, a pagan Roman official, Vinicius, is clandestinely in their midst. After Peter's discourse he is stunned into perplexity and disorientation. He thinks to himself,

*These ideas were a completely new way of looking at the world and totally rearranged everything known before. He sensed that if he were to follow the teaching, he would, for example, have to make a burnt offering of everything that had made him; he would have to destroy his thinking, crush all his perceptions, excise every habit, custom and tradition, erase his whole acquired character and the driving force of his current nature—burn it all to ashes, consign it to the winds, and fill the void with an entirely different soul and a life on a wholly different plane. A philosophy that taught love for Parthians,*





*Syrians, Greeks, Egyptians, Gauls and Britons seemed like lunacy; love and forgiveness to an enemy and kindness in the place of vengeance were simply sheer madness...What he heard seemed totally divorced from reality as he understood it, and yet it made his reality so insignificant, it was hardly worth a passing thought.*

So also it is with those “who have eyes to see and a mind to understand” what is being conveyed in *The Passion of The Christ*. The Gospel is there—the nonviolent Jesus living unto death a nonviolent, merciful love of friends and enemies, in trusting obedience to the Will of the loving “Father of all” (eph 4:6) “who causes the sun to rise on the bad as well as the good and who lets his rain fall on the righteous as well as the wicked” (mt 5:44-46), who is “rich in mercy” (eph 2:4) and who is infinitely forgiving of the most recklessly sinful of His sons and daughters (lk 15:11- 32). Admittedly, a Messiah in the mode of the nonviolent Suffering Servant of Isaiah (is 42:1 ff) is an absurdity in the minds of most people—not Good News. To accept the call of such a Messiah to “Follow me” is self evidently ludicrous. To try to build a community centered around incarnational fidelity to this type of Messiah and His Way is unrealistic—a waste of life and time. Yet, there is an unnameable quality of transcendence about the Messianic Way of nonviolent, suffering love towards both friends and enemies as revealed in the Passion of Jesus that makes traipsing through the world of normal religion, normal politics, normal value systems seem “so insignificant, it is hardly worth a passing thought.”

Ninety percent of what most human beings know initiates in the sense of sight. There is something about “seeing” the nonviolent love of Jesus unbegrudgingly and superabundantly showered upon both those who love Him and those who hate Him, that evokes in the soul an innate awareness that says to the self:

*“This is it! This is goodness. This is the truth of the Absolute. This is the Way. This is what I’d really want to be, if I but could. This is where our only hope resides. This is power. This is wisdom. This is the God that I long for in the deepest chambers of my being. This is the God that is! Yes, I know it!”*

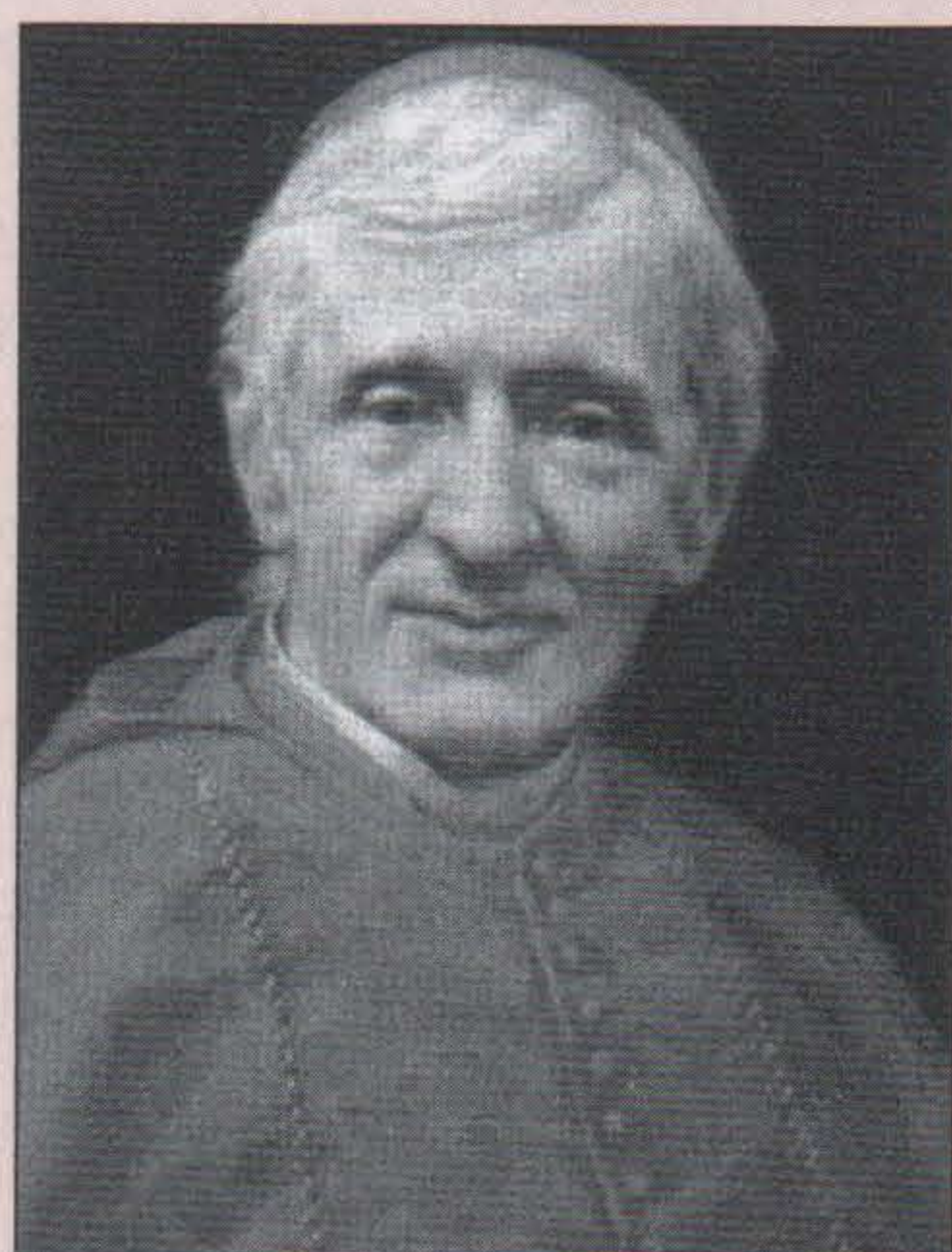
Then organically, from this gift of a new knowledge of God, flows gratitude. Eucharistia, “thanksgiving,” fills the soul:

*“Thank you God for letting me ‘know’ you and your salvific love for me and all people. Thank you Jesus for paying the price required to reveal this to me, required to bestow this grace, this gift, upon the world. For if You had not been” lifted up from the earth” (jn 12:32), I and the world never would have known the truth and depth of the mystery of the Father’s magnetic love for us. We would never have been able to consciously live in it or be a channel of it to others—especially those in most need of it. Deo gratias! Alleluia! Amen.”*

By Gospel standards Mr. Gibson’s previous films are trash, rooted in a heap of trash and destined for a trash dump— “hardly worth a passing thought.” But *The Passion of The Christ* is of God. Its roots are ultimately to be located in the Way, the Truth and the Life of the Eternally Holy One. *The Passion of The Christ* is the rarest of all Hollywood phenomena—a film with potentially positive eternal significance. ■



REV. EMMANUEL CHARLES McCARTHY, is a Melkite Catholic priest of the Eastern-rite who is presently the Acting Rector of St. Gregory the Theologian Melkite Seminary in Brookline, MA. He is the father of 13 children.



Cardinal John Newman

*On Issue #55, page 25, we mistakenly published the picture of Cardinal John Newman. It should have been this picture of St. John Neumann.*



St. John Neumann