



INSIDE THE PASSION

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OVERVIEW

INSIDE THE PASSION

SUMMARY

This Study Circle Guide is especially useful during Lent. It can also be adapted as a small-group activity during a faith-experience like a mission or a non-silent weekend retreat.

The book *Inside the Passion* is a scene-by-scene analysis of Hollywood's highest grossing R-rated film of all time, *The Passion of the Christ*, directed by Mel Gibson. *Inside the Passion* is the only authorized explanation of the film, written after in-depth interviews with all the filmmakers.

This Study Circle Guide provides guidance for a faith-based reflection on this work of cinematic art. *The idea is to go beyond the emotion stirred up by the film, and use the artistic excellence as a springboard for spiritual personal, spiritual renewal.*

CATEGORIES OF INTEREST

Catholic Doctrine; Bible; Prayer and Spiritual Growth; General

RECOMMENDED NUMBER OF SESSIONS

The Study Circle Guide contains 4 “sections.” But each section has enough material for multiple sessions. The sweet-spot for this Study is to make it weekly during Lent. But it can also be done as a Day of Reflection or Retreat, choosing ahead of time which sections to use and in what order.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Copies of the Study Circle Guide for all participants.
- At least one copy of the book, *Inside the Passion*. Ideally, each participant would have a personal copy. But the relevant sections for each session could also simply be photocopied and distributed.
- If the Study Circle will only use the book, then each participant should have seen the film *The Passion of*

the Christ. But the group may also plan on watching the film together, then discussing it with the Study Circle Guide.

- **OPTIONAL:** A copy of the film *The Passion of the Christ*. The Study Circle Guide recommends basing the study around reading and discussing specific sections of the book. But it also recommends watching and discussing particular scenes from the film. If this option is chosen, you will need the necessary technological apparatus.
- **OPTIONAL:** If you have never moderated a small-group study, we recommend that you read “The Better Part Group Study Guide” published at www.SpiritualDirection.com and available there as a free download. This is a leader’s guide that explains how to use *The Better Part* in a group discussion setting. This Guide is short and provides extremely helpful hints for any small group activity.

WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?

Anyone. This Study Circle Guide offers some basic doctrinal guidelines on faith, hope, love, and forgiveness, and then uses the film and the book to spark personal reflection on and a greater understanding of those Christian realities. Anyone who likes discussing film will enjoy this Guide. Nothing about this Guide is primarily or exclusively directed towards members of the ecclesial movement Regnum Christi.

For those who are more advanced in the spiritual life, the discussion will be deeper. But since the focus is on a work of art, it is accessible and could be fruitful for people at any point in their faith journey.

This approach has also been effective as an ongoing formation activity to be offered in a parish during Lent.

HOW MUCH HOMEWORK?

The only required homework would be for everyone to see the film, unless the film will be watched together by the group at the beginning of the study.



GETTING STARTED

INSIDE THE PASSION

INTRODUCTION

Great works of art are worth coming back to. They open a window into the realm of lasting truth, goodness and beauty. Gazing through that window rejuvenates the soul, nourishes the heart, and refreshes the mind. This is doubly so when a great work of art happens to be religious, as in the case of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*.

In order to help viewers uncover more levels of beauty and meaning in the film, in February, 2005 Ascension Press published *Inside the Passion*, the only authorized explanation of the film. It takes you inside the spiritual and theological context, as well as the filmmakers' intentions.

The enthusiastic response to *Inside the Passion* spurred a further exploration of the film. The following study guide, written by the book's author, Fr. John Bartunek, LC, will help individuals and groups discover new vistas, and appreciate the old ones with even greater gusto.

USING THE STUDY GUIDE

Mel Gibson himself often explained that the *The Passion of the Christ* is about "faith, hope, love and forgiveness." With that in mind, this Study Guide is divided into those four Sections. Each Section offers some questions and/or suggestions for reflecting on parts of the film that especially bring out those values.

The Study Guide can be used on its own (along with the relevant passages from the book *Inside the Passion*), thus you can finish each Section in one session of 45-90 minutes, depending on how long you want your discussion to go.

The Study Guide can also be used in conjunction with the movie's DVD. In this way, you can opt to extend each Section over more than one session by actually viewing the referenced scenes before and after you discuss them. Thus, the Study Guide can be used to accompany prayer or study groups throughout Lent, or for a whole day's seminar, or for a unit in a film or religious class, or in any number of other ways. The format gives you flexibility.

Additionally, the suggested scene analysis can be used to help introduce the film to friends and acquaintances who were discouraged from seeing it by media criticisms that accompanied its release. This is a great work of art that shouldn't be missed. You can gather a group of such friends together on Fridays during Lent, for example, and introduce them to the film bit by bit following the sections of the Study Guide.

However you choose to utilize the Study Guide, it will be helpful to have a copy of the Bible available for reference during your sessions. Much of the Study Guide will spark analysis of the film from an artistic point of view, but the evaluation of the artistic choices depends on referring back to the original Gospel texts.

The questions for discussion within each Section can be followed in any order. If you are using this for a group study, therefore, read them all through beforehand so you can choose where best to begin with your group. Also, there is no need to force your way through all the questions of a particular session if only one or two are sufficient to spark fruitful discussion.

Since there is some overlap of scenes, read through the whole Study Guide in order to avoid surprise repetitions during the course of your study (you can choose ahead of time which scenes you will watch/discuss for each Section).

It would be constructive and proper to begin and end each session with a prayer. Although this film is a product of Hollywood, it is a work of art that reverently touches the Sacred, and so you can appropriately ask for the Holy Spirit's guidance as you seek to know, love, and follow Christ better through its analysis.

NOTES



SESSION I

FAITH

The Catechism offers more than one definition of Christian faith. Here are two:

- “Faith is man’s response to God, who reveals himself and gives himself to man, at the same time bringing man a superabundant light as he searches for the ultimate meaning of his life.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, 26*)
- “By his Revelation, ‘the invisible God, from the fullness of his love, addresses men as his friends, and moves among them, in order to invite and receive them into his own company.’^[1] The adequate response to this invitation is faith. By faith, man completely submits his intellect and his will to God. With his whole being man gives his assent to God the revealer. Sacred Scripture calls this human response to God, the author of revelation, ‘the obedience of faith.’^[2] (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, 142–143*)

The essence of faith, then, is an intimate encounter where the soul expresses its trust in God and God’s truth, where God both gives the gift of his light and invites us to accept this gift. With this in mind, discuss the following questions.

1. Pontius Pilate and King Herod both seem to have plenty of opportunities to make an act of faith in Christ. Why don’t they? What holds them back? Is it the same for each of them? Have you had or do you know someone who has had a similar experience?

Relevant sections from *Inside the Passion* (one or more of these can be read out loud to spark discussion)

- “What’s on Pilate’s Mind” (*Pages 67–69*)
- “More than Mere Politics” (*Pages 70–71*)
- “Herod’s Story” (*Pages 80–81*)
- “Jesus, Herod, and Pilate: Contrasting Ways of Life” (*Pages 81–82*)

Relevant scenes to discuss/view

- Pilate’s interview with Jesus when Jesus is first brought to him
- Pilate’s conversation with Claudia after Jesus’ trial with Herod
- Jesus’ trial with Herod

A similar analysis can be done with Caiaphas and the other Leaders of the Sanhedrin, cf. “Encounter with Caiaphas” and “The Silence of the Lamb” (*Pages 57–62*); the corresponding scenes can be viewed.

2. At first Simon of Cyrene has to be forced to help Jesus carry his cross. Yet, by the end of his journey to Calvary he can barely be torn from Jesus’ side. He has become a believer. How did it happen?

Relevant sections from *Inside the Passion* (one or more of these can be read out loud to spark discussion)

- “Simon of Cyrene’s Reluctant Redemption” (*Pages 122–124*)
- “Two Sermons on the Mount” (*Pages 124–126*)

Relevant scenes to discuss/view

- Jesus carrying his cross—from the moment when Simon is forced to help him until arriving on Calvary

[1] Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum #2

[2] Cf. Romans 1:5, 16:26



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SESSION 2

HOPE

According to the Catechism:

- “Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ’s promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit...” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1817*)
- “The virtue of hope responds to the aspiration to happiness which God has placed in the heart of every man; it takes up the hopes that inspire men’s activities and purifies them so as to order them to the Kingdom of heaven; it keeps man from discouragement; it sustains him during times of abandonment; it opens up his heart in expectation of eternal beatitude. Buoyed up by hope, he is preserved from selfishness and led to the happiness that flows from charity.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1818*)

In essence, hope means banking on God. It’s a grace that enables us and urges us to confide in God’s goodness, no matter what. It consists in refusing to seek meaning, fulfillment, and happiness in anything that would require breaking off one’s friendship with Christ. With this in mind, discuss the following questions.

1. Peter, though he sins, doesn’t lose hope. Judas does. Why the difference?

Relevant sections from *Inside the Passion* (one or more of these can be read out loud to spark discussion)

- “The Real Judas” (*Pages 37–39*)
- “The Tragic End of Judas” (*Pages 39–41*)
- “Peter: The Other Side of the Judas Coin” (*Pages 41–42*)
- “Good Guilt, Bad Guilt” (*Pages 43–44*)

Relevant scenes to discuss/view

- Judas receiving payment from Caiaphas in the Temple
 - Judas and Jesus meeting under the bridge
 - Judas being persecuted after the trial up until his suicide (you may want to begin watching from the end of the trial itself, when Judas realizes what’s going to happen)
 - Judas returning the money to Caiaphas
 - Peter’s denial of Jesus and his flashback to Jesus’ prediction of that denial
2. Mary Magdalene is on the verge of losing hope as the soldiers nail Jesus to the cross. Only a minor miracle bolsters her confidence. Do you think this scene was effective? Why or why not? According to the film, what was the basis of Magdalene’s hope?

Relevant sections from *Inside the Passion* (one or more of these can be read out loud to spark discussion)

- “Magdalene’s Miracle” (*Pages 142–144*)
- “Magdalene’s Flashback” (*Pages 101–102*)
- “A Trio of Grief” (*Page 98*)

Relevant scenes to discuss/view

- Magdalene’s Miracle and Magdalene’s Flashback



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SESSION 3

LOVE

Christian love is more than a feeling. It is a deep commitment to the authentic good of the one we love. It is directed first of all towards God, whom we love and adhere to above all things for his own sake, simply because he is so lovable. Secondly, it is directed to our neighbor, whose good we firmly desire and pursue because we know that he too is loved by God and therefore worthy of heaven. Christian love is traditionally known as the virtue of charity.

Jesus summed up all of the teaching of the Gospel in two commandments: “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself” (*Matthew 22:37–39*). He also commanded us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (*Matthew 5:44*). At the Last Supper, he instituted the New Commandment: “...love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another” (*John 13:34*). It is by our love that we will be judged at the end of time (and at our death), by how fully we have given ourselves to God and to our neighbor (*cf. Matthew 25*).

With this in mind, discuss the following questions:

1. Jesus Christ is the model of every virtue, including love, and the incarnation of God’s divine charity. For this reason, his entire Passion should be a revelation of Christian love. Discuss how this love is manifested throughout the film. In your opinion, which scene/moment was the most eloquent expression of Christ’s love?
2. Mary, the Mother of Jesus, loves her son both on a natural level (because she is his mother) and on a supernatural level (because he is her God). Which scenes express this love most powerfully?

Relevant sections from *Inside the Passion* (one or more of these can be read out loud to spark discussion)

- “A Mother’s Heart” and “The Wisdom of a Mother’s Sorrow” (*Pages 52–55*)
- “The First Flashback” (*Pages 55–56*)
- “Magdalene’s Flashback” (*Page 101*)
- “A Mother’s Challenge” (*Pages 116–118*)

- “Mary’s ‘Amen’” (*Pages 144–145*)

Relevant scenes to discuss/view

- Mary’s first appearance and first flashback
 - The entire flagellation sequence, from Mary’s perspective
 - Mary and Jesus’ encounter when Jesus falls on the way to Calvary
 - The entire Crucifixion scene, paying special attention to Mary’s point of view
3. Veronica is almost alone among the Christians of Jerusalem on the day of Christ’s Passion, in that she is not afraid to come out and acknowledge her love for him by wiping his face and offering him a drink when he falls on the way to Calvary.
 - Why do you think the filmmakers decided to include this encounter and not include many of the other non-Biblical details about the Passion that tradition and the writings of the mystics record? In fact, this non-biblical scene is included while the biblical encounter between Jesus and the Pious Women of Jerusalem is left out. Why? What does it add to the film? Would it have been better to leave out? Could it have been depicted better?
 - Read “Veronica’s Angelic Courage” (*Pages 118–121*) and “Conspicuously Absent: the Pious Women of Jerusalem and the Devil” (*Page 121*), and view/discuss the corresponding scene.
 4. Claudia Procles, Pilate’s wife, is unable to stop the tragedy of Christ’s condemnation and death, but she finds a way to make a gesture of charity when she gives some linen cloths to Mary.
 - Why do you think the filmmakers chose to include this scene, which isn’t found in the Bible? Do you think it was a good decision, why or why not?
 - Read “Comfort in Surprising Places” (*Pages 96–98*) and view/discuss the corresponding scene.



- Read and discuss “Mary and the Dignity of Love” (Page 83)
5. God had the power to save us without having to sacrifice his Son, without making Jesus suffer so much. Why didn't he?

Relevant sections from *Inside the Passion* (one or more of these can be read out loud to spark discussion)

- “A Tale of Two Gardens” and “The Nature of the Battle” (Page 19) “Freely Accepted” (Pages 27–28)
- “Gethsemane: A Microcosm of the Whole Passion” (Pages 28–29)
- “Love and Suffering” (Pages 47–48)
- “Sacrifice and Destruction” and “From Abraham and Isaac to Father and Son” (Pages 135–138)
- “Two Sermons on the Mount” (Pages 124–125)
- “God's Tear” (Page 161)

Relevant scenes to discuss/view

- Christ's whole prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, starting right after Judas accepts the betrayal money from Caiaphas
 - The Crucifixion section, with special attention to the flashbacks to the Last Supper
6. Throughout the film, the Devil is trying to get Jesus to stop loving.
- What tactics does he use and why is he unsuccessful? (Read from “A Cosmic Struggle” to “In Conversation with the Devil” (Pages 19–24))
 - What tactics does the devil use to get us to break this fundamental commandment? How can Christ's Passion help us resist these temptations?

7. Through the flashbacks to the Last Supper, the film links Christ's self-sacrifice throughout his Passion to the Eucharist and the Mass. Why was making that link so important for the filmmakers? What lessons does it have for our own lives? (Read “The Last Supper Flashbacks” and “Flashbacks to the Future” (Pages 138–142)).
8. Did this film make you want to love more, better? Why or why not? What form should love for God and neighbor take in the life of a mature Christian? In our lives?

At the end of your discussion of love, an appropriate closing prayer could be to recite slowly together one or two of St. Bridget's Prayers Before a Crucifix, which were one of the sources of inspiration for Mel Gibson. Leave some moments of silence before the closing prayer, so each one can pray in the quiet of their heart.

FROM “FIFTEEN PRAYERS OF ST. BRIDGET”

FIRST PRAYER

Recite one Our Father and One Hail Mary.

O Jesus! You have proved that You have no greater desire than to be among men, even assuming human nature at the fullness of time for the love of men. I recall all the sufferings of Your life especially Your Passion.

I remember, O Lord, that during the Last Supper with Your disciples, having washed their feet, You gave them Your Most Precious Body and Blood, and, while consoling them, You foretold Your coming Passion.

I remember the sadness and bitterness which You experienced in Your Soul as You said, My Soul is sorrowful even unto death.

I remember all the fear, anguish and pain that You did suffer in Your delicate Body before the torment of the Crucifixion, when, after having prayed three times, bathed in a sweat of blood, You were betrayed by Judas, arrested by the people of a nation You had chosen and elevated, accused by false witnesses and unjustly judged by three judges.



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SESSION 4

FORGIVENESS

Jesus emphasized forgiveness in the prayer that he taught his disciples: “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” In this prayer we both acknowledge our need for God’s forgiveness (and since Jesus taught this prayer for all of us, we all have this need), and in turn we promise to offer the same forgiveness to those who offend us. In a world inundated by sin, forgiveness (mercy) is the maximum expression of love. On our own power, we cannot live this Christian virtue as fully as we are called to, but “with God all things are possible” (*Matthew 19:26*).

With this in mind, discuss the following questions:

1. Why did the filmmakers give so much attention to the figure of Malchus, whose ear is cut off during the fight in the Garden of Gethsemane and then miraculously healed by Jesus? What does it contribute to the film at this crucial dramatic period when the story is just being introduced? (Read “The Arrest” (*Pages 44–46*) and “Lessons from Malchus” (*Pages 48–49*) and watch the whole arrest/fight in the Garden of Gethsemane.)
2. In the Bible, Jesus forgives his persecutors only once, from the cross. In the film, he does so twice—once while he is being nailed to the cross, and again once he has been lifted up onto the cross. Do you think this addition enhanced or detracted from the Biblical reality? (Read “Spotlighting Forgiveness” (*Pages 147–149*)).
3. Critics of the film complained that it was too violent. Was the violence gratuitous? Do you think the film could have been as or more powerful with less violence? Why or why not? What was the meaning of the violence and its relation to the meaning of the film? Do you think the filmmakers found the right balance between realism and artistry? If not, what could they have changed?

Relevant sections from *Inside the Passion* (one or more of these can be read out loud to spark discussion)

- “Too Graphic?” and “Multifarious Reactions” (*Pages 87–91*)

- “The Guards’ Exaggerated Cruelty” and “Another Glimpse into Jesus’ Heart” (*Pages 91–94*)
- “The Devil’s Heyday” (*Pages 94–96*)
- “Jesus’ Flashback: The Bloodstained Sandal and the Washing of the Feet” (*Pages 99–100*)
- “The Crowning with Thorns” (*Pages 104–105*)
- “How Did It Work?” (*Page 133*)
- “The Hungry Cow” (*Pages 149–151*)

Relevant scenes to discuss/view

- The flagellation sequence as a whole
 - The long sequence in which Jesus carries his cross to Calvary
4. Other critics deemed the film anti-Semitic, i.e. they accused it of being racist against Jews. That would be a direct contradiction of this central Christian teaching of the value of mercy and forgiveness, of the virtue of Christian love.
 - Why might some critics have felt this way? Was it a legitimate fear before the film came out? Was it a fair criticism to launch against the film once it had been released?

Relevant sections from *Inside the Passion* (one or more of these can be read out loud to spark discussion)

- “Caiaphas Is Let Off the Hook” and “Roots and Fruits of Controversy” (*Pages 126–130*)
- “Two Sermons on the Mount” (*Page 124*)
- “Spotlighting Forgiveness” (*Pages 147–149*)

Relevant scenes to discuss/view

- Jesus’ Trial in the Temple



