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Talking Back: Father Fulco's Baptism of Fire

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TALKING BACK

In the fall issue, Marilyn Beker, Loyola Marymount University, wrote of the tension between teaching the ideals of Jesuit education and then sending students into the world of Hollywood, where values were bound to clash. To keep the conversation going, we invited Loyola's Edward J. Siebert, S.J., professor of communications and director of Loyola Productions, to sit down with William J. Fulco, S.J., professor of Mediterranean studies, and discuss Fr. Fulco's work with Mel Gibson on the script of Gibson's film, *The Passion of Christ*, which is to open nationwide on Ash Wednesday.

Then we turned to New York, where two young film writers, David Bagnon and Henry Griffin, both graduates of Loyola New Orleans, are establishing their careers, and asked them to consider Professor Beker's article and compare its observations to their experience.

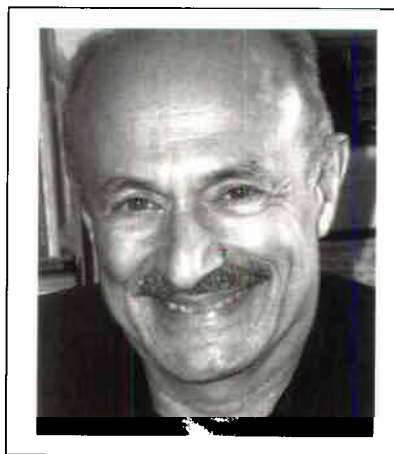
FATHER FULCO'S BAPTISM OF FIRE

*What Happens When a Jesuit Scholar Gets
Heavily Involved in a Controversial Film*

Loyola Marymount's William Fulco and Ed Siebert in Conversation

Eddie: **You are working with Mel Gibson and his latest film, *Passion of Jesus Christ*. Can you tell me how you got involved in the film?**

Bill: I'm really not sure actually. Icon Productions phoned me one day. I had never heard of Icon Productions. They asked me if I would like to be involved with a project that entailed translating an Aramaic script. Well, I asked, what kind of Aramaic? I'm leaving for Jerusalem in a couple of days; can't it wait until I come back? I gave them a contact number. I took off for Jerusalem and two days later I got the call. "Hey



WILLIAM FULCO, S.J.

Padre, it's Mel. I've got a project for you." Then I realized it was Mel Gibson and he explained the

project, *The Passion*. It looked like a major film...I was very excited and I couldn't say no.

Eddie: **What did they want you to do exactly?**

Bill: Well, the role has grown considerably, at first it was to translate the entire script into ancient languages, Aramaic. Then we discussed whether it should be Latin or Greek. We ended up with Latin for artistic reasons, and that was it...but that was a big job because I had to translate the entire thing into ancient languages. I then had to supervise the coaching of the actors in the pronunciation of it...

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saying their lines with understanding and expression. So my role grew.

We developed a relationship, I became an advisor on the archeological, historical, theological, biblical matters. And since the cast itself had their own religious issues — with Mel with his rather sectarian type of Catholicism, with the Italians in the Rome shoot, many of whom had fallen away from the Church, and with Monica Balluci asking me why should Jesus make a difference in one's life.

With Mia Morganstern, the lead female, being Jewish, and my personal assistant being Jewish and rather disturbed about the whole Christian phenomenon, my role then became sort of that of a chaplain and a peacemaker. So the role has expanded. I got very much involved with the press very soon when the kind of Scotch-taped committee of the Catholic Bishops [a committee formed by the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to intervene in the film's production lest the script offend Jews: ed.] began the attack on the script.

The bishops later separated themselves from that committee; but at the time I was the intermediary, because I was the priest [involved with the production]. So I spent a very difficult couple of weeks, with the e-mail and recriminations going back and forth. That was Holy Week of this year 2003. I found that it was extremely painful, and Mel Gibson did too. So we talked and shared a lot on that. But because of that, I developed a role of being a spokesman

to the press, although I was not exactly on the staff of Icon Productions. I was an independent contractor, but I was very knowledgeable about what was going on and so it became convenient for me to speak a lot with the press and to address the issues. So gradually, my role became pretty much involved with the production staff itself.

Eddie: What were the concerns that people were bringing up? What were your major concerns?

Bill: All the concerns originally came from the Jewish concerns. The movie is simply not the same thing as the script. Far from it. They were making accusations that the script is anti-Semitic, that the Jews were made to look like they were responsible for the death of Jesus. But the issues became much broader than that. The question was raised as to whether the New Testament itself was anti-Semitic and it was implied that Christianity itself, if adhered to strictly, is anti-Semitic. So the discussion became a media event, in a sense an anti-Christian, Christian-versus-Jew argument very soon. This was most unfortunate, because for anyone who has seen the film that sort of criticism is just not justified.

Then it became very political. I tried to stay clear of the political part, but I simply could not because of Mel Gibson's father. The father is 85 and said all sorts of bizarre things. Some of the things he said are actually true; he just says things that nobody else will say — or is afraid to say. Then there is the question about the chapel Mel built in Malibu and the fellow who wrote the

article in *The New York Times Magazine* that triggered that whole controversy in the first place. The writer's father lives next door to the church's property and was trying to get even by raising personal and political issues against it.

In the course of this controversy, which I got involved in very early, I found the experience a real pilgrimage, with a lot of self doubt. I kept questioning myself. Are they right? I did this entire script. I mean, I didn't catch anything. Should I have caught something, did I miss it? I'm a trained theologian and a Near Eastern scholar. Have I been careless and stupid? So I went through a period of real doubt. I taught for years at the University of Judaism, I worked with the Israeli Dept. of Antiquities. And also once in Jerusalem at the Wailing Wall, because I look Jewish, someone asked me to pray. And I joined in. That's been my life for years. So it was doubly painful for me to be attacked by the Jewish community or by some segments of it.

Eddie: Can you talk about the highs and lows of the film? The arc in the filming process?

Bill: It has been up and down, and it has been an arc to some degree. There were heavy days of shooting in south Italy and Rome and a totally new experience and very exciting and my energies were very much involved with this incredible new experience working in a field I knew nothing about. Film stuff goes to your head pretty quickly; but then we came home from some of the major shoots. Approaching Holy Week of this year, when the flack started

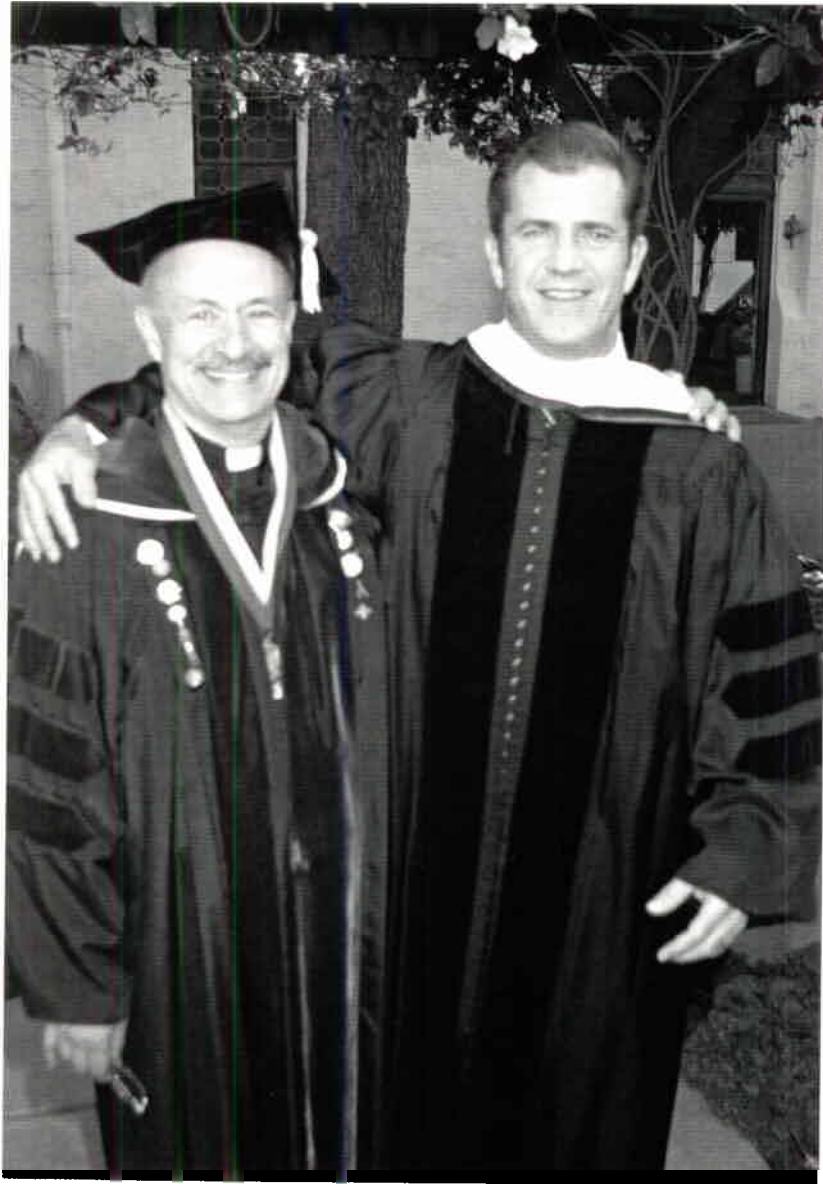
coming and I got caught in the middle with e-mail arguments. I went into a depression and panic, and started second guessing. What have I gotten myself into?

But then I really trusted Mel and knew where he was coming from. I theologially disagreed with him on all kinds of issues. We talked about them, we were honest with each other. We had a deep respect for one another; but I wondered, was he blind to something? Am I blind to something? So I went through hell for at least a month or so of this kind of raging thing. Eventually, I saw my way through it and thought about it and we were not doing anything wrong.

This film is not anti-Semitic, we have not made a mistake, it is a beautiful work of art. I gradually became more militant about it, and now I feel like I am doing something priestly, preaching the gospel, and it seems when you preach the gospel it invites flack.

So I don't care what they say. But I do care. And it still annoys me. Why do they say these things? Tomorrow we have a big press conference and we will be attacked again, but my feeling is, that's the way it goes. This is the gospel. It is not anti-Semitic, it is preaching Jesus crucified; and Paul says in his letters that to preach Jesus crucified is a stumbling block and a scandal and that is not the wisdom of the world.

That's my attitude toward the movie at this minute. Every once in a while I get distressed when personal friends attack me. My Jewish friends in Beverly Hills that I've known — I taught with them at the University of Judaism years ago,



William Fulco, S.J., and Mel Gibson

they are in their 90's now, we have been very close friends we have dinner together. This past Seder service during Passover, they invited me over for dinner and instantly I was attacked. They said, why are you doing this to us? My Jewish friend visited me from Texas the other day. He read about me in the papers. Why are you doing this? How did you get involved in this something against us? Well, that hurts, because that is on a person-

al level. But in terms of the film itself and the press, my attitude is I consider it my priestly duty.

Eddie: How much of that is brought up by the press?

Bill: It makes news and gets people riled up and the press is just rehashing it and rearranging it. I think the press started the whole thing.

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Eddie: Press is press. Could this help the movie? Do you think Mel and Icon Productions actually thought about that?

Bill: Well, that was what people were saying — that this is 20 million dollars worth of free publicity. That turned out to be the case, but we frequently had brainstorming sessions with Mel Gibson and myself and Steve McEveety and Bruce Davies, part of Icon Productions, to say, let's keep out of the news if we at all can. Let's have a couple of months of peace because it is just too painful to work under that kind of pressure. So I think all of us, especially Mel, took it very personally and really suffered through it. And he didn't see this as helpful at all, he just saw it as something that puzzled him, hurt him, distressed him and wished it would go away. So I don't think that anyone looked on this as oh boy, we are getting free publicity. It was pretty awful.

Eddie: It's noted that *The Passion* is a labor of love on Icon Productions' part, and Mel's part. Can you say something about that?

Bill: You know Mel in his youth, his wayward youth, was an active alcoholic and drug addict. We used to joke about that, I'm in AA and so we speak the same language. And he was not all together a faithful husband and so on. Under pressure from his wife, he was bottoming out in the early 90's and he had a religious experience, and he describes it not so much as identifying with the Passion, but that the Passion of Christ identified with him, with his suffering. Christ reached

down and embraced him, so he has had almost an obsession with the Passion of Christ as a saving factor in his own life, and he has wanted to do this for a long time.

Some people have said it is just *Braveheart* all over again. But it's not in the sense that *Braveheart* was a strong effort to get what he wanted to get at, or salvation through suffering and freedom in spite of suffering. That was part of his pilgrimage, he was trying to think his way through what was his religious experience. And so for about 12 years, he has been wanting to do the Passion as such, and finally, he reached the point where he could do it. What is remarkable, I think, is that all of us who have worked with him, we shared the same pilgrimage. We became very much in it as a faith experience — including the Jewish people, the folks like the Jewish actress, for example, Mia Morgenstern and other Jewish folks who have been involved.

Eddie: That's good. I want to get your perspective on Hollywood and Catholicism after working on this film. You've experienced a real sense of what it is to be in the film business. You were baptized by fire. Can you say something about the relationship between the Hollywood movie industry and Catholic or Christian ideologies?

Bill: Of course my experience is very limited, but certainly I think of how many people I have gotten to know. Mel Gibson and other actors and actresses have stopped by for coffee and chatted, and I've met a lot of people and we talked about a lot of issues. So now I feel a real mission as a Jesuit to engage

myself and to keep the doors open and talk with people who obviously have a big influence on American society.

It's been my experience across the board, especially in Rome, when we virtually lived and breathed and slept together — you know, the whole crew — a surprisingly large number are Catholic.

I was very surprised last month, when we were doing the editing at Sony studios, and I kept reading the names of graduates of Loyola High and Loyola University. I guess the underlying issue that occurred to me with almost everybody, whether Catholic or non-Catholic, was an enormous hunger for spirituality which they did not find readily in their workplace. Their workplace seemed to skew the possibilities of finding what they were after because the Hollywood situation seems to be so competitive, so ruthless in many respects in terms of publicity, in terms of money, in terms of power, especially in terms of power and in terms of dominance. Everyone wants to be the alpha dog, or the alpha bitch. That skews Hollywood as a context, it seems to me, for perusing spiritual values. And I found, especially among the Catholics, that we have a natural language to talk to one another.

There is this incredible hunger for some sort of spirituality, an emptiness that they experience. And because of that everyone is skewed off in some strange direction. There is Mel Gibson, who has his own direction, everyone knows about that, he is very liberal in terms of politics and society, but very conservative in

terms of Catholicism, because he is desperately trying to hang on to something that is stable and unchanging. Whereas, the modern Church is not stable and unchanging.

It's unstable and constantly changing to Monica Bellucci, who is baptized a Catholic and a very smart woman who went to law school and so on, who repeatedly asked me — she got involved in the film almost against her own better judgment — why Jesus has come to make a difference to her. She phoned me from Los Angeles where she was doing a film with Bruce Willis a month or two back, to ask the question again. I found on the set, constantly, when there was a break or something, somebody says, Father, do you have ten minutes? Jim Caviezel, who plays Jesus, a pious Catholic, his spirituality is very difficult for most people — incredibly intense and somewhat borderline, I think. He would not mind me saying that, he would be proud that I referred to him as slightly over the edge. Anyway, for these reasons, I found everyone eager to talk about their spiritual life.

Eddie: I know that's exactly true, I find the exact same thing. Jesuits, more and more, need to be involved in this business.

Bill: That's where we belong.

Eddie: What do you think of Loyola Productions?

Bill: I think Loyola Productions is the perfect answer to this.

Eddie: We are moving in that direction.

Bill: Loyola Productions is the perfect bridge between Jesuit spirituality and the film industry, Jesuit spirituality and Jesuit know-how.

Eddie: I've found that there is such a desire for people to get to a deeper understanding of their Faith, their life, their make-up. They question, and are looking for someone to talk with about those things. Because frankly, the people on the set, the people you work with are sometimes too uncomfortable to talk to each other. But if one of us is in there, it give them an excuse to talk about matters of the soul. At least, that's what I've found.

Bill: We call a conference to talk some *People* magazine article or what are we going to do about the scheduling, and it would be Steve McEveety the producer, Bruce Davies the co-owner of Icon, and Mel Gibson and two or three other people in the room. Then after we did address some business we would end up with an hour or two conversation about spirituality, which is a great way to deal with some real gut level issues.

Eddie: Many people bash Hollywood because they think that Hollywood is anti-spiritual, anti-religion, anti-God, whatever; and in fact, that is not the case at all, because filmmakers are trying to create. They respect the faith life and are really trying to understand the deeper issues of life. Questioning is good for the artist.

Can you say any more about Jesuit works and the Hollywood industry?

Bill: I do think that the Jesuits, better than anyone else, are in a position, because of our background and training and our very spirituality, to get to leap into the fray and we don't mind — well, we do mind — but you know, we anticipate that we are going to have a bumpy ride. We are not going to run from controversy. We are not going to run from self-doubt either. We belong in the fray and we certainly belong in one of the biggest instruments in modern communications.

Eddie: Do you have any memorable moments you want to share from this film? Did you ever say to yourself, "What the hell am I doing here?"

Bill: For me, this is where my academic life, my pastoral life, my spiritual life have all come together. It's almost like a summary of my life. But something comes to mind. There are a couple of instances where, after a fair absence, I have run into Mel Gibson. He will grab a hold of me, and give me a big hug, and kiss me on the neck. Doesn't that sound bizarre: this man who was written off as a homophobe. What that says to me is a mark of appreciation and respect on his part, saying that he values me for what I am doing not just because I am an Aramaic Scholar, which I am not really.

Eddie: You know more than most

Bill: But I found that a very moving sort of thing that we have a spiritual connection.

Eddie: How are people going to react to this film when they see it?

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Bill: I think people will be devastated. I think the scene that will undo them after they are emotionally filled up will be the Pieta when Mary holds Jesus and looks out at the audience. People will squirm in their seats, and it's not going to be a question of Jews or Romans, it's going to be Jesus and me. Where have I been in all this? I think it is going to be an intensely personal moment.

Eddie: **Is there anything I have not asked you that you would like to comment on or talk about a little bit?**

Bill: One thing that occurs to me is that regularly in Rome and now

even this evening I have said Mass in Latin using the Tridentine form for Mel. The Cardinal made the comment when I told him about it the other night and he said you do what you have to do in pastoral situations. That was the only comment. You Jesuits are good at that. You do what you have to do. But I have gotten a lot of flack from that sometimes from fellow Jesuits who say, you know you are catering to somebody's perversity, and so on. To my mind this is such a minor thing what form the Liturgy takes. Here is a man whose influence is enormous, and to keep the door open with him and to speak with him and to do something that is fine in

itself even though people may say it's not the most up-to-date thing.

I am just trying to address myself to his needs. I'm not aiding and abetting sinfulness or stupidity. I'm trying to deal with a sensitive man where he is and where he can feel comfortable because he is doing something that is outstanding and remarkable. And little by little because of this dialog, he is moving away from that kind of position. One, because I don't threaten him, and I don't try to convert him. I don't try to pound something into his head, and I think this is what Jesuits should do.

Doing Wrong to Discover What's Right

To Marilyn Beker
By David Baugnon

As a Loyola Alum, a working screenwriter and a screenwriting teacher, I know all too well that the realities of the business can crush idealism. When I graduated in 1990 from Loyola New Orleans in Communications, I couldn't get a job to save my life. I went to Japan in 1992 where I taught English for four years, lost thirty pounds on the poverty diet and was nearly killed in the Kobe earthquake. My takeaway from that experience: life is sometimes hard. *Very Hard.*

You would think I would have learned my lesson, but I then moved to New York to take up screenwriting. Six years later, I

have had a small amount of success. I optioned a script, I had two short films play in film festivals and I teach for Writers Boot Camp 22 month program that focuses on teleplay writing and screenwriting. Not great, but I doubt I would have made it this far if it weren't for my optimism.

But let's not confuse idealism with naiveté: most screenwriting students will *never* have their ethics tested in this business- they won't even get the chance. Screenwriting is one of the most competitive and difficult fields to break into, full of sexism and ageism. On top of that, any script reader will tell you, 90 percent of what crosses their desk is unproducible junk. Maybe 9 percent is competent and only 1 percent will actually go into the collaborative process.

And that's exactly what it is: collaborative, and that means compromise. While I applaud Loyola Marymount Professor Marilyn Beker for stressing Jesuit values and originality in her students, her exhortation for them to become screenwriters "who refuse to compromise their (values)" seems more likely to yield rejection than a green lit script. I am not saying screenwriters must compromise their values. I am saying they have to know the market realities and be able to put their values across in an entertaining and cinematic way. If one way isn't working, find another.

Just under two years ago, I optioned a script (coincidentally titled *Code of Ethics* about an ethics professor at a Jesuit University) that had a scene