

Scandal: The cross

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [April 20, 2004](#) issue

A few weeks ago, I received an e-mail message from a reporter who was working on a story about sexual abuse allegations against the former Roman Catholic bishop of Springfield, Massachusetts. “I’m looking for a religion scholar,” the reporter wrote, “who could speak to how an organized religion maintains or reaffirms its role as moral arbiter when there is scandal within.”

The wording of the reporter’s inquiry made me stop and reflect. It may seem odd, but for many of the faithful the “scandal within” is having a bracing rather than a demoralizing effect. “Kick the bums out,” a neighbor of mine said, “and let’s get on with the good work of the church.” Scandal is inevitable, according to the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:7, and “Woe to the man by whom the scandal comes!” Yet a scandal exposed can make us take stock of what really matters, and renew commitment to the teachings that were betrayed. Satan—if you truly exist and if you are, as René Girard says, scandal personified—take note: Though you can cause immense harm by your seduction of free will, and though the present scandal is surely one of your great masterpieces, you cannot control the good that will come out of it. The curious double meaning that “scandal” (*skandalon*: stumbling block, offense) has acquired in Christian usage is a clue to your downfall. Like “cleave” (to cut) and “cleave” (to bind), scandal is a double-edged sword.

On the same day, another journalist called to get reactions to Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ*. I haven’t seen it, so I won’t presume to judge it. But the controversy surrounding the film has colored this year’s Lent a deeper shade of violet. From the earliest prerelease rumors to the staggered succession of opening days, wave upon wave of scandal has swamped the media on every continent, like a vast tsunami.

Putting aside the issues that have been talked to death, one remarkable fact remains. As a result of seeing or (like me) not seeing this film, millions have been led to contemplate the saving scandal and triumph of the cross. What can it mean that day after day the sanctifying blood of Christ—and an artistic effort to represent it on film—makes headlines round the globe, side-by-side with lurid reports of clerical

abuse? What do these two scandals—the blood on the face of the crucified Christ, and the mud on the face of Christ’s bride the church—have to say to one another?

Even if it were not so relentlessly violent, the film was bound to offend, for its subject is the archetypal offense: the Son of God made scandal. Just as we are growing accustomed to reasonable, reputable, comfortable expressions of Christian faith, we are reminded, uncomfortably, of the Paschal scandal. Just as we are telling ourselves that it is, on the whole, a positive thing to fall into the hands of the living God, the correction comes—it is a wonderful but also a fearful thing (Heb. 10:31). We like to think that we have a psychologically balanced faith; we measure our words pragmatically by their effect on social relations, and willingly consign ancient expressions to the dustbin if they offend contemporary sensibilities. We are particularly uncomfortable with the idea of an atoning sacrifice, in which spirit pours itself out as blood. Surely, we think, such notions are an atavism, on a par with medieval pictures of Satan-Leviathan impaled upon a fishhook cross.

In a brilliant two-part essay on the atonement for the Christian Century (“Christ crucified,” March 7, 2001, and “Visible victim,” March 14, 2001), S. Mark Heim points out how discomfiture with sacrifice has diluted Christian celebration of the Lord’s Supper: “In many Protestant congregations this event has become a solemn ritual affirmation of the spiritual equality of the participants, their mutual commitment to one another, and their shared hope for a future society with a just distribution of resources. Even the Roman Catholic Eucharist, once steeped in sacrificial emphasis, can now be encountered in forms that seem primarily celebrations of community, with a moment of silence, as it were, for the untimely demise of our late brother.”

The cultural shift Heim describes accounts for at least some of the strong reactions to Gibson’s film. A still photo of actor James Caviezel, his face streaming with fake blood (which is about as close to the film as I can bear to go), evokes a thousand forgotten or rejected images of the Man of Sorrows. Bach’s Passion Chorale “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” (“O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden,” the German hymn based on a medieval prayer addressed to the “Feet, Knees, Hands, Side, Breast, Heart, Face” of Christ on the cross) is familiar enough, but this year its message sinks in: “Yet, though despised and gory, I joy to call Thee mine.”

Whether Gibson’s film is a life-changing work of religious art, as several of my friends report, or a crude bloodbath, as others say, the event (namely, the film and the reactions it inspires) places us squarely in front of the *skandalon* or “eucatastrophe” (in Tolkien’s expression) of the gospel. The radiance of Christ’s

victory over death is the final *skandalon*, and it shines right through the blood. Scandal for scandal, blood for blood, if *l'affaire* Gibson can help us see that the wounds of our age are bound up in the sacred wounds that heal, it is a gift for which we have good reason, in this Eastertide, to be grateful.