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“The Passion of the Christ” Having Unexpected Impact:

Film and Surrounding Debate Might Be Lessening Hostility Toward Jews

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Although 24% of Americans familiar with Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ” say that Jews alive at the time were most responsible for Christ’s crucifixion, less than two percent of Americans blame Jews of today. In fact, according to a new nationwide poll of 1,003 randomly selected adults, a larger number say the film has made them less likely, rather than more likely, to hold Jews and Jewish institutions in our own time responsible for the killing of Christ.

Commented Dr. Gary Tobin, President of the Institute for Jewish & Community Research (IJCR): “While the film may have a different impact elsewhere in the world, so far the Passion of the Christ is not producing any significant anti-Jewish backlash. The film and perhaps even more, the discussions about the film, are having something of a positive effect, which is good news. Some Jewish and Christian leaders have been understandably worried that the film might unleash a wave of hostility toward Jews and even erode the constructive effects of Vatican II. But this does not appear to be happening. Their concern, however, was not unfounded given the rise of anti-Semitism around the world, and the central theme of Christ killing in anti-Jewish prejudice.”

Among those who have seen the film or are familiar with it, most (83%) said the film had no impact on the extent to which they feel contemporary Jews are to blame, two percent said “The Passion” has made them more likely to hold Jews responsible, but nine percent said the film has made them less likely to hold today’s Jews responsible. The rest did not know. Of the 146 respondents who had seen the film, 80% said the film had no impact, five percent said “The Passion” has made them more likely to hold Jews responsible, and 12% percent said the film has made them less likely to hold today’s Jews responsible.

Dr. Tobin also noted that “the questions raised about the anti-Jewish images in the movie helped bring the question of the role of Jews in the death of Christ out in the open. It is better to have dialogue and honest discussion and trust that the bond between Christians and Jews in America is strong.”

Other findings from the survey reveal that most viewers and those familiar with The Passion are pleased with it as artistic historical depiction:

- Sixty-four percent said it provides an accurate and thorough portrayal of the meaning of the life of Jesus, while 13% disagreed;
- Although 16% would have preferred that the film focus more on Christ’s life and teachings and less on the immediate events preceding the crucifixion, 62% are satisfied with the film the way it is;
- Sixty-two percent said the film is true to the Gospels, but 19% think that Mel Gibson imposed his own interpretation of events that may not be accurate.

Some still hold Jews of today responsible for the killing of Christ. Last month, an ABC News PrimeTime poll, taken before the film’s release, found eight percent of Americans agreeing that “all Jews today bear responsibility for the death of Jesus.” In the present survey, less than two percent agreed that, “...Jews alive today, or Jewish institutions that exist now, should be held responsible for the death of Christ.” Observed Sid Groeneman, a

survey consultant who worked on the IJCR poll: “There are several possible reasons for the difference: First, the questions were not worded the same way: ‘should be held responsible’ seems stronger -- possibly conveying that retribution is necessary – than the wording ‘bear responsibility for’. Second, the polls were taken at different times – the ABC News poll, before the film’s release; the IJCR poll, 9-13 days after the release. There was tremendous coverage of the film in the media, and millions had a chance to see the movie, read reviews, and discuss it with others. Some people’s opinions about Jewish responsibility might have changed, with fewer people blaming Jews, as the IJCR poll suggests. Both polls produce a smaller figure than many expected.”

Already, 16% of American adults have seen the film. Of those who hadn’t seen “The Passion” at the time the survey was conducted, 56% said they plan to see film. Combined with those who have seen the film already, this projects to a total audience of 64% of U.S. adults, about 135 million viewers, plus unknown additional millions under 18 who will see the movie.

The findings cited in this release come from a poll conducted for the Institute for Jewish & Community Research, an independent research organization devoted to the study of contemporary Jewish life that provides social science and policy research to the Jewish community, philanthropic organizations, and the general community. The survey was conducted March 5-9 by ICR (International Communications Research), a leading polling firm that does work for ABC News and the Washington Post.

Percentage estimates based on the full sample are accurate within plus or minus 3.1 percentage points; for estimates based on those who saw the film or are familiar with it, the range is plus or minus 3.7 points. As in all surveys, other factors besides the sample size can affect the accuracy of the results.

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