

Film boosts Christian merchandise

``The Passion of the Christ' has bookstores scrambling to keep up

Associated Press
March 1, 2004

A line of merchandise to accompany Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ*, which depicts the last hours of Jesus' life, has Christian bookstores in Ohio scrambling to keep displays stocked.

David Wilson said his suburban Maple Heights store can hardly keep up with the demand.

Jesus T-shirts sold out in a week, and the store is replenishing supplies of other items in preparation for an expected rush.

Besides the T-shirts, the Rainbow Family Book Center, which Wilson co-owns with his wife, Alice, offers a coffee-table picture book with scenes from the movie, pewter pocket reminders and film-inspired prayer cards.

Also, the official *The Passion of the Christ* jewelry line, marketed by Bob Siemon, the creator of the ``What Would Jesus Do?" jewelry, includes bracelets, lapel pins and necklaces -- the most popular of which has been a 2 1/2-inch pewter nail pendant, meant to replicate the crucifixion nails.

An estimated 75,000 nail pendants, which come harnessed to leather cords, have been shipped to vendors across the country. Although Rainbow does not offer the nail yet, Wilson said at least 96 pendants will soon be available.

The movie's officially licensed apparel Web site sells \$18 T-shirts in black or white with images of a wounded heart and a crown of thorns.

At Covenant Christian Books in Broadview Heights, there's been a lot of shopper interest in the movie-related items, including a \$7.99 mug with the words ``The Passion" and a passage from Isaiah, according to Kim Hounbeck, an employee at the suburban Cleveland store.

The English version of the mug, which also comes in an ancient Aramaic version in the language of Jesus, was sold out Friday on the movie Web site.

At the Catholic Shop, a privately owned bookstore in Madeira near Cincinnati, the top movie-related items are the coffee table-size movie book *The Passion* and a CD with the movie soundtrack, said Julie Spitzig.

``We're selling a lot of stuff every day," Spitzig said, including about 20 of *The Passion* books listing for \$24.99.

The new iconography of the nail might serve to sensitize Christians to the gruesomeness of the Crucifixion and the violence suffered globally on a daily basis, said Doris Donnelly, professor of religious studies at John Carroll University.

`` The crucifix was once embedded with jewels and emphasized the beauty of the Resurrection, because in the Middle Ages, seeing the suffering of Jesus was not an effective evangelical instrument to inspire people to become Christian," she said.

`` The crucifix alone does not emphasize the sense of horror that accompanies the act of crucifixion," she said.

Young shoppers such as Nicole Ramseur and LaTonya Walker, both of whom have tattoos of a cross or the likeness of Jesus on their backs, agree that the nail pendant has breathed new life into the expression of sympathy for Jesus' suffering.

`` The symbolism of the cross is so watered down now," Ramseur said. `` Everyone wears the cross, even those who don't go to church. We needed something that speaks louder than the cross. And the nail is what was used to put him there."

Wilson said the pervasiveness of popular culture in the merchandise undermines the more spiritual aspects of its message.

`` Younger people are looking for different ways to express their faith," he said. `` That's the point of what we're doing. Everything we sell here has a message, and we hope it changes lives."