

Sister Rose took on the Catholic Church and won

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Passion is an important aspect of many religions. Christianity uses the term to encompass the events surrounding the Crucifixion. Mel Gibson has lent the term hot-button recognition with his controversial 2004 movie, *The Passion of the Christ*.

Now there's *Sister Rose's Passion*, a documentary about one nun's relentless crusade to eliminate anti-Semitism in her church. It's an effort that couldn't be more different from Mr. Gibson's and has been rewarded with an Oscar nomination for best short documentary. It's even been picked by *Entertainment Weekly* as a possible spoiler for the predicted winner, *Autism Is a World*.

It's not hard to see the film's appeal: Sister Rose Thering was born in 1920 in a rural Wisconsin town that had no blacks and only one Protestant family. One day she was riding with her father when he whispered "We have a new pharmacist, and I think he's Jewish." Her dad wouldn't explain why he felt compelled to lower his voice when they were by themselves in a moving car.

As the now-84-year-old activist recalls, she grew up in her devoutly Catholic family – eventually joining the Dominican Order – and began to realize that her father's whisper grew out of years of belief that the Jews were guilty of deicide – the murder of Jesus.

That didn't quite make sense to her. As she says in *Passion*: "The Jews never crucified anyone. Romans crucified people."

As she continued her training, the issue grew more consuming. Finally, undertaking her doctorate, she decided to look at how the Catholic Church had addressed the Jews' role in Jesus' death.

The results, she said, made her feel ill. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, church books of religious instruction seemed filled with invective and calumny. So – with a single-mindedness that seems the province of nakedly honest souls – she set about rectifying the situation.

"Sister Rose is feisty, she's determined, and she's willing to take things on," said director and producer Oren Jacoby, whose résumé includes work for National Geographic, ABC, PBS and the BBC. "She's a very powerful character."

It's hard to imagine how she could appear as anything else. Remembering that when she was young being shushed only led to her resolve never to be shushed again, this woman – now frail and trailing an oxygen tank – seems more vital than many people a quarter her age.

The film does a good job of illustrating her growth. From old-school movie footage of young potential nuns (dressed as brides and prostrating themselves before the altar) to Holocaust footage, the flickering light on the screen makes her journey not only obvious but inescapable.

"We were especially lucky," said Mr. Jacoby. "We had to rely in places on stock footage, but we found a lot that was unique and new. The stuff with the young girls in their wedding gowns we found by asking the convent."

By the time she was studying for her doctorate in 1957, the Holocaust had been burned into popular consciousness.

"A lot of listening came out of that," she says in the movie. "A lot of things that I heard just didn't fit the picture."

The idea that Abraham and Isaac – let alone Jesus, Mary, Joseph and the Apostles (all Jews, by the way) – would not be allowed into heaven had mystified her since childhood.

Through her efforts, one of Vatican II's 1965 declarations, *Nostra Aetate*, absolved the Jews of the "blood libel" that they'd been saddled with for almost 2,000 years.

That this one woman – animated by her sense of right and wrong – could bring the pope himself to reverse centuries of propaganda is one of Sister Rose's understated triumphs.

"Really, it's a model for all religious hatred," Mr. Jacoby said of Sister Rose's target. "And it's something that's still very much a problem today."

Another theme is the simple indomitability of someone who knows right from wrong. Sister Rose goes on to be roughed by Nazis at Kurt Waldheim's inauguration in Austria, and the people involved with her projects continue to get virulent hate mail to this day.

The film ends with a *Passion* of a different sort – Mel Gibson's. "It was clear as we were making this film that this was going to be an issue," Mr. Jacoby said, referring to the oft-repeated charges that Mr. Gibson's movie portrayed the Jews of Jesus' era in an unfavorable light.

Although Sister Rose only occasionally seeks to refute Mr. Gibson's justifications for the tone of his film, her opinion is clear from the look on her face as she views it.

That fits with another bit of clarity – "another especially lucky moment," according to Mr. Jacoby – when Sister Rose addresses an intelligent, well-spoken group of middle school students. "Did you help hide Jews?" one student asks.

That comes close to a question she's often asked herself: "What would you have done, Rose, had you been in Europe? Would you have had the courage? .. I hope that I would have."

It's a testimony to the effectiveness of this film that by the time we view this segment, we know the answer.

DETAILS: *Sister Rose's Passion*, directed by Oren Jacoby, 39 minutes. Not rated, it's nominated for an Academy Award in the short documentary category. The ABC telecast of the Oscars starts at 7 p.m. Sunday with the arrivals show, and the ceremony starts at 7:30 p.m. The film will premiere May 24 on Cinemax.