Abstract
This film guide serves as an educational resource for viewing *The Mission*, the 1986 award-winning film set in eighteenth century colonial Brazil about the efforts of two Jesuit priests—one a missionary and one a former slave trader—to establish and defend a mission benefiting the indigenous Guarani people in the midst of the struggle for political mastery of the Americas between Portugal and Spain. The film addresses several themes related to religion and conflict, including ways of dealing with tension between religious and political authorities and ongoing debates about Catholic just war teaching. This guide includes a synopsis of the film, historical context on the Spanish and Portuguese colonization of the New World and the role of evangelization in that process, a list of key terms, discussion questions, and a list of recommended further readings.

About this Film Guide
This film guide was crafted under the editorial direction of Eric Patterson, visiting assistant professor in the Department of Government and associate director of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University.

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The Mission (1986)

SYNOPSIS

*The Mission* takes place during the period of the Jesuit Reductions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, during which time Jesuit missionaries established numerous missions (reductions) independent of the Spanish state in order to teach Christianity to native inhabitants. At the forefront of this endeavor, the Spanish Jesuit priest, Father Gabriel (played by Jeremy Irons), arrives in the jungle of South America to establish a mission and convert a small village of Guarani Indians.\(^1\)

The film begins with the gruesome image of a Jesuit missionary tethered to a cross, being inexorably drawn down a river toward the massive Iguazu Falls. The missionary, nearly unconscious due to wounds suffered at the hands of Guarani warriors yet praying fervently, is carried over the falls by the rushing torrent of water. His martyrdom galvanizes another priest, Father Gabriel, to climb the treacherous rocks of the waterfall and reach out to the backcountry tribe. Upon reaching the upper flats of the falls, Father Gabriel is tracked down by Guarani warriors prepared to kill him. However, Gabriel is able to calm the warriors by playing an enchanting solo on his oboe. This simple gesture is the beginning of Gabriel’s acceptance by the tribe.

The story then shifts to Rodrigo Mendoza (played by Robert De Niro), a slave trader and mercenary who makes his living by capturing Guarani Indians and other native people and selling them to local plantation owners. Mendoza kills his brother in a jealous rage upon finding him in the arms of his fiancée, and then becomes wracked with guilt. Father Gabriel, who finds out about Mendoza’s actions, seeks out the imprisoned man to offer him a path to repentance and salvation. Mendoza reluctantly agrees, but only after ensuring that his penance will be sufficient for the crime he has committed. Thus, the tools of Mendoza’s former life—heavy armor and weapons—are bound within a satchel and attached to his waist, while he must find a way to scale the dangerous cliffs of Iguazu Falls. Ultimately, Mendoza’s guilt and pride drive him up the deadly falls until he reaches the Guarani camp, where the former slave trader is met with skepticism and disdain. One of the Guarani eventually comes to Mendoza, cuts the satchel off, and casts it into the falls, thereby releasing him from his penance and representing the forgiveness of the tribe. Mendoza is then able to take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, becoming a Jesuit under the guidance of Father Gabriel.

The Guarani warmly receive Father Gabriel’s mission, which blossoms through the leadership of Father Gabriel and the eagerness of the Guarani to learn. Father Gabriel, Mendoza, and the mission’s other priests teach the Guarani reading, writing, mathematics, as well as how to sing and play the flute and violin. The development of the mission in the film is based on the two dozen historical Jesuit missions that were built in the region prior to 1750.

*The Mission* also addresses the political undercurrents of the time period. Following conflict between Portugal and Spain, the two countries signed a treaty calling for Spain to transfer control of some land, including the land containing Father Gabriel’s mission, to Portugal. This agreement is critical because Spain formally outlawed slavery, while slavery remained legal in Portuguese lands (Brazil) for another century. The plot of the movie is driven by efforts of the Jesuits to thwart Portuguese slave traders seeking to enslave the Guarani and other tribes. Because Jesuit missions are traditionally respected as a place of sanctuary, the potential threat of Portuguese expansion sparks papal emissary Altamirano (played by Ray McAnally) to survey the mission to decide whether or not it should be shut down.

Facing extraordinary pressure from plantation owners, politicians in Spain and Portugal, as well as the mission and the Guarani,
Altamirano must choose between a set of controversial options. If Altamirano sides with the colonists who want the mission closed, the Guarani and other indigenous peoples will become slaves. On the other hand, if he rules in favor of the missions, the Jesuit order may face the wrath of the Portuguese government and perhaps even be abolished in Portuguese lands. Although Altamirano is impressed with the work and progress of the mission, Father Gabriel is unable to convince the emissary to maintain the mission’s autonomy. Thus, the official policy decision states that Father Gabriel’s mission must be closed. Father Gabriel and Mendoza both refuse to obey the decision, deciding to maintain the mission’s operation even if the Portuguese attack it.

As the local colonists and plantation owners start planning a raid against the mission, Father Gabriel and Mendoza have a difference of opinion on how to face the confrontation. Father Gabriel eschews violence and argues that the mission should confront war with nonviolent resistance out of trust in and respect for God’s love. Mendoza, however, forsakes his vows and prepares to fight, teaching the Guarani what he can about warfare.

Mendoza and the Guarani manage to thwart the initial attack of the Portuguese, which occurs on a Sunday during Mass. However, the colonists’ gunpowder and numbers soon overpower the primitive Guarani defenses. The attackers pursue the Guarani to the mission, where Father Gabriel and the Guarani women confront them with sacred music, crosses, white robes, and Holy Communion. Although the beauty of the Guarani mission captivates some soldiers, they are ordered to attack. The priests of the mission and most of the adult Guarani are massacred. A few women and children escape deep into the jungle. The mission is reduced to a scorched church, charred land, a broken violin, and Gabriel’s shattered oboe.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The exploration, conquest, and settlement of the New World established the political rule of the Spanish and Portuguese Empires over large portions of the Western Hemisphere from about 1500 to 1900. This included present-day Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean islands, significant portions of North America, and all of South America, not to mention colonies elsewhere (e.g. Angola, Mozambique, Equatorial Guinea, the Philippines). The fundamental imperial purpose was political and economic power; but because both Spain and Portugal were deeply Catholic and the initial colonial period coincided with the rivalries associated with the Reformation and Counter Reformation, missionary endeavors were also a key component of policy, particularly in Spanish territories.²

Spain and Portugal competed for power in the New World, but a second tension was between religious and political authorities. For instance, how should they treat native peoples? If part of Spain’s mission was to extend Christendom, shouldn’t it do so through evangelism, winsome diplomacy, and kindness? Or were the locals savage enemies to be dealt with firmly? Part of this tension was theological, and a vigorous debate surrounded the status of indigenous people due to their controversial practices of ritualistic cannibalism, public sexuality, and mass human sacrifice. During this time, the Spanish Scholastics debated and extended Catholic Just War teaching on the issues of jus ad bellum (the morality of going to war) and jus in bello (the morality of how war is fought). Two prominent voices illustrate the intensity of the debate: Juan de Sepúlveda and Bartolomé de las Casas. Citing natural law and Aristotle, Sepúlveda claimed that the native people were barbarians beyond the pale of civilization due to the well-documented practices of cannibalism and human sacrifice (e.g. Aztecs, Incas, and others) and thus it was just for the Spanish to attack them and extend the boundaries of Christendom. This was not an argument for slavery or torture, but one that saw Spain’s conquest as bringing order and Christian morality to the New World. In contrast, las Casas questioned the morality of Spain’s motivation for going to war in the first place and argued that even if the cause was just, that noncombatants (women, children, farmers, the elderly) were not legitimate targets—even if they were idol-worshippers and cannibals. The ethics surrounding the Spanish and Portuguese conquest of the New World in the sixteenth century—or the Affair of the Indies, as the moral dilemma came to be known—incited crucial debates about the relationship between war, justice, and peace.³

This debate also meant that the Spanish and Portuguese went on two different tracks vis-à-vis slavery in the New World. By the early eighteenth century, the Spanish outlawed slavery; slavery continued in (Portuguese) Brazil until 1888. The Spanish Catholic Church played a robust role in banning slavery, particularly in its religious orders (e.g. Franciscans and Jesuits), as voices on behalf of native peoples.
The Mission is set in the midst of these real events, particularly the 1750 Treaty of Madrid, which ceded Brazilian territory that included Jesuit missions, such as Father Gabriel’s in the film, to the Portuguese. These Jesuit missions, also known as reductions, were unique from many other missions in the Americas in that they expected the natives to convert to Christianity but generally did not expect them to adopt European cultural norms. These Jesuit reductions operated largely autonomously from the imperial authorities governing the territory. It is well documented both by clerics and by visitors that the size and sophistication of the mission in this film—which includes natives singing in Latin, a violin shop, sculpture, and literacy—are historically accurate. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, by 1732 there were thirty Jesuit-Guarani missions in the South Brazil-Uruguay-Paraguay region with over 140,000 Christian Indians. However, with the expulsion of the Jesuits from the New World in 1767 and the cession of many of these missions to the Portuguese, this unique world was shattered. The film depicts well the religious and political controversies of the day, including the relationship of papal Rome to the national Catholic hierarchies in Spain and Portugal; the political and religious responsibilities of the Spanish king to native peoples in his dominion; how religious authorities and clerics can engage political leaders in pursuit of moral policies; the loyalty of low-level political and religious officials to their authorities; the contrast between an idealized and actual world; whether an eternal (religious, spiritual) perspective shapes how one views real-time events; and whether politics is only about interests rather than values.

### Key Terms

Identify and discuss the following:

- Guarani people
- The Affair of the Indies
- Treaty of Madrid
- Jesuits
- Evangelization in the New World
- Expulsion of the Jesuits from the New World
- Jesuit reductions
- Slavery in the New World
Discussion Questions

1. Analyze the character of Mendoza. Describe the various transitions he underwent and the impact of his job as a slave trader, his failed relationships, his crimes, and his newfound peace as a Christian. In the end, how does Mendoza reconcile his vows as a Jesuit with his decision to resist Portuguese aggression by force?

2. Father Gabriel talked about being a Jesuit. What is unique about the Jesuit tradition relative to other Christian traditions, particularly in regard to the intersection between colonization and the spread of religion?

3. Justify why Spanish and Portuguese governments did or did not have a right to colonize Brazil. What about the Jesuits and other missionaries—did they have a right to share their faith with the Guarani? Did they have a responsibility to their faith to evangelize? Did they have a responsibility to the Guarani to reach out to them?

4. Consider the action of penance performed by Mendoza. How did Mendoza attempt to atone for his sins and gain acceptance into both the Jesuit and Guarani communities? Are there any lessons to be gained in terms of current cross-cultural interactions and the process of bridging divides and healing old wounds?

5. What religious symbols are apparent in this movie? For instance, what is the significance of Father Gabriel’s name? The method of execution in the opening scene?


