

The Mission (1986)

Warning: the following is more of an analysis than a review, so if you have not seen the film, you might want to watch it first before reading any further. The very first paragraph contains a spoiler, with more to come, necessary in order to discuss the issues.

Rated PG. Running time: 2 hour 5 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 5; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 3.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

Put your sword back into its place; for all who take sword will perish by the sword.

Matthew 26:52b

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

...let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...

Hebrews 12:1b

The Mission, directed by Roland Joffe (*The Killing Fields*), is set amidst the power politics of 18th Century Europe, and yet

is as relevant today as any article from the New York Times. The film is important for peacemakers because it shows two ways of resisting political tyranny: through the nonviolence of the gospel espoused by the head of the Mission of San Carlos, Father Gabriel (Jeremy Irons); and the way of the sword, taken up by the former slave trader Father Rodrigo Mendoza (Robert DiNiro). The "practicality" argument, used by those who reject nonviolence as a viable option for those struggling against tyranny, is subverted in this film because both priests and their followers die as martyrs. The sad-ending film can be viewed as a challenge to viewers to move beyond the so-called practicality arguments to consider the deeper issues of ethics. One unresolved question the viewer is left to ponder: "Is physical survival more important than losing one's soul?"

San Carlos, the Mission of the title, was founded by Father Gabriel after the martyrdom of the first Jesuit missionary who went up river above the spectacular Iguazu Falls to preach the gospel to the Guaraní Indians. The fate of that unfortunate priest, tied to a large wooden cross and set adrift in the river, is shown at the beginning of the film. The small image of him hurtling over the falls to his death is featured on one of posters advertising the film.

Father Gabriel has been more successful, winning over the natives through his skillful use of music, the result being that the Mission has become a thriving community in which faith-inspired music is central to the peoples' lives.

Though located in a remote area bordering Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina, the Mission is not beyond the reach of the struggle between the papal authorities, the monarchs of Europe, and the powerful order of the Jesuits.

The latter have emerged from the Counter-Reformation period so strong an institution that the Order is regarded by many governments as a threat to both church and state. In the

Treaty of Madrid (1750)*, brokered by the Vatican, control of the territory in which San Carlos is located was given to the Portuguese, and the Jesuit missions were ordered to disband.

The film's narrator is Cardinal Altamirano (Ray McNally), the papal emissary sent to mediate the dispute between Spain and Portugal over control of the mission lands beyond the great falls. Unknown to the colonials and the two priests, he has already decided to close the Missions to placate the colonials and their monarchs, the only real question being who shall receive control of the lands and their riches. He is totally unprepared, however, for the piety, beauty, and industry of the Mission Indians and for the reaction to his decision of the two Jesuit priests, Fathers Gabriel and Rodrigo.

Earlier in the film we saw the proud adventurer Rodrigo Mendoza, who raids the Indian villages for slaves, kill his brother in a duel that was sparked by discovering him in bed with his mistress. His anger subsided, the remorseful Rodrigo entered a prison cell and refused to come out, despite the authorities declaring that killing during a duel was not a crime.

Fr. Gabriel was called in to counsel with the remorseful man. Mendoza demanded to be left alone, declaring heatedly that there is no forgiveness for killing his own brother. The priest would not give up, drawing him out so that he accepted a challenge to prove who was wrong.

The ex-slaver's penance was to drag behind him a large net filled with his armor and sword as he follows the small company of priests returning up river to the Mission. It is a heavy burden, slowing down the party so much that Fr. Fielding (Liam Neeson) and the other priests try to talk Fr. Gabriel into relenting and cutting the rope. He replies that only Rodrigo can cut the rope to release the burden.

What happens as the party painstakingly climbs up the cliff over which the mighty river falls for hundreds of feet is one of the finest visual examples of grace I have ever seen in a film. Events during the climb and at the top where the Mission Guaranís await them transform Mendoza from a man of war and grief into a man of love and peace—though, sadly, as we see late in the film...

The cynical heart of the seasoned Cardinal diplomat is softened when the two priests guide him on a tour of the Mission. The people are industrious, and highly gifted in musical abilities, the Mission choir sounding like angels. Thus what the cleric is compelled to do is done with an uneasy conscience. He has encountered two men who will never accept the compromises and rationalizations upon which he has built his church career.

The Cardinal does try to set up a compromise with the colonial representatives to assure that the Indians will be treated with respect and not be reduced to slavery, but the Portuguese reject this. He gives in to what he regards as the inevitable: to keep Portugal from attacking the Jesuit order back in Europe, he must close the missions here and tell the people they must leave their sanctuaries, their future being a reduction to slavery.

Father Gabriel, at first, stifles his own sense of the Mission's being dealt with unjustly. His lifelong habit of obeying authority leads him to accept the decision to close the Mission, but when confronted by the decision of the Mission's Guarani chiefs not to abandon San Carlos, he decides to stay with them, resisting the soldiers, but without violence.

Rodrigo, on the other hand, decides that the Portuguese invaders must be met with force. Father Gabriel's words have little effect on him, "If might is right, then love has no place in the world. It may be so, it may be so. But I don't

have the strength to live in a world like that, Rodrigo." Several of the Guarani boys have retrieved his old armor and sword that had been thrown into the waters of the river at the foot of the falls. He accepts the sword that the boy who has become attached to him holds out. He leads a portion of the adult Indians as well as Fr. Fielding and another priest who agree with him that they must use weapons of violence to resist the colonialists greedy for their land (and who would reduce them to slavery).

When the invading soldiers arrive and see Fr. Gabriel peacefully holding a sacred instrument while leading a procession of his followers toward them, the soldiers hesitate, clearly reluctant to shoot at the unarmed crowd. Their officer commands them to open fire, and they do. Meanwhile Rodrigo and the Guaraní, following his lead, manage to kill several of the attackers, but armed only with primitive weapons, they prove no match for their foes, who have hauled in a cannon.

The film concludes with both groups of resisters being martyred. They have lost, and yet in the irony-filled conclusion, the Cardinal admits to a spiritual defeat he had not foreseen. After rejecting the suggestion that this is the world that we must live in, he writes in his report, "So, your Holiness, now your priests are dead, and I am left alive. But in truth it is I who am dead, and they who live. For as always, your Holiness, the spirit of the dead will survive in the memory of the living."

The clash between the two ways of resisting tyranny is not just a historical matter, as we see in another film set in Latin America, [Romero](#). A little over two centuries after the incidents depicted in *The Mission*, Archbishop Oscar Romero became the spiritual leader of the oppressed people of El Salvador. He dared to speak out against injustice through his radio program beamed to his people, many of whom were Indians

or peasants of mixed blood, murdered with impunity by government sponsored death squads. As with Rodrigo, one of his priests confronts the Archbishop, telling him he is going off to join the armed guerillas. Romero angrily remonstrates with the priest, but like Rodrigo, this priest will not be swayed from taking up arms to fight against their oppressors. As long as there is massive injustice, both films show, people will be confronted with the choice of how to resist.

In the 19th century New England, poet James Russell Lowell protested against the Mexican War because he regarded it as a means to extend slave territory. His poem "The Present Crisis" was widely circulated in the North, and from it four stanzas were taken and set to music, the hymn called "Once to Every Man and Nation." Once found in many hymnals, it begins with the stirring words:

"Once to ev'ry man and nation Comes the moment to decide, In the strife of truth and falsehood, For the good or evil side..."

After a tribute to past martyrs for truth and freedom the hymn concludes in the fourth stanza:

"Tho' the cause of evil prosper, Yet the truth alone is strong; Tho' her portion be the scaffold, And upon the throne be wrong; Yet that scaffold sways the future, And, behind the dim unknown, Standeth God within the shadow, Keeping watch above His own."

I think the expedient Cardinal Altamirano, though he could not live up to its ideals, would have agreed that the words of the hymn apply well to the two priests who dared to disobey him. Though opposed to each other as to how to respond to injustice, they become united in death. A note just before the end credits informs us that the struggle of the American Indians for justice continues, often with the support of priests This is followed by a quotation from John 1:5, "The

Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." A fitting epitaph for those in the film who gave their lives in the struggle against injustice, and who still risk their lives today in that same fight!

* (For more on this and [Guarani War](#) see the Wikipedia article at:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guarani_Warhttp://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guarani_War

James Russell Lowell's entire poem can be found at <http://www.bartleby.com/42/805.html>

And the shorter hymn at http://www.hymnary.org/text/once_to_every_man_and_nationhttp://www.hymnary.org/text/once_to_every_man_and_nation

My book *Praying the Movies* has a meditation "Cheap Grace and Costly Grace" centered on the amazing grace portion of the climb up the falls, and my *Films and Faith* has a discussion guide on the whole film.