In the 18th century, Spanish Jesuits made their way through the stunningly beautiful jungle of South America to evangelize the native people. There, the missionary priests and brothers worked to enrich the native culture, integrating the teachings of the Gospel into the customs of the people.

*The Mission*, Roland Joffé's 1986 award-winning film based on real events, shares the story of one such mission, through which the Jesuits shared the faith with an indigenous tribe, the Guaraní.

In the Jesuits' first attempts to bring the faith to the Guaraní, missionaries were brutally tortured and killed. Frightened, yet undeterred, Father Gabriel — whose name, like that of the archangel who announced the Good News to Mary, means “God’s messenger” — personally takes it upon himself to continue the work of the martyred missionaries, risking his life to share the Catholic faith. Gabriel’s music and gentle persona fascinate the Guaraní, who quickly welcome the Jesuits to build a mission for their people.

The Mission of San Carlos is a peaceful and democratic community where the natives learn to read and write, sing Latin hymns, carve delicate instruments and create beautiful sculptures. It is quite different from the nearby European settlement, where the Spanish and the Portuguese compete for control of Brazil. Among these Europeans is Rodrigo Mendoza, a mercenary who makes his living by capturing the Guaraní and selling them to local plantation owners.

Early in the film, Mendoza kills his brother in a jealous rage. Afterward, overwhelmed by guilt, he experiences the message of God’s mercy under the guidance of Father Gabriel, much like the Guaraní before him. The priest leads him to the tribe, who cut away Mendoza’s burden — the weapons and armor he once wore when capturing the native people — that he has dragged up the Iguazu Falls as penance for his sins. Mendoza, grateful for their forgiveness, asks to join the Jesuits, promising obedience to his superiors in the Order.

The dichotomy between these two men, the peaceful priest and the passionate soldier, is heightened by the visitation of Cardinal Altamirano, papal emissary to Brazil, who is sent to survey the missions. A place of sanctuary, the missions protect the Guaraní from being enslaved, but they also prevent the Spanish and the Portuguese from claiming control of the jungle. By keeping the missions open, the Jesuits risk the wrath of these European nations, which continue to pressure the Vatican to disband the Jesuit Order, both in South America and throughout most of Europe.

Succumbing to this political pressure, the cardinal declares that the missions must close. Shouldering the consequence of this decision, he must write the account of the missions. Through his eyes we are brought into the story of these three men and experience their heavy burdens of love, passion and politics.

“He who goes about to reform the world must begin with himself, or he loses his labor.”

— St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus
Memorable Quotes

Cardinal Altamirano: With an orchestra, the Jesuits could have subdued the whole continent. So it was that the Indians of the Guaraní were brought finally to account to the everlasting mercy of God, and to the short-lived mercy of man.

Father Gabriel: I am laughing because what I see is laughable. I see a coward, a man running from the world.

Father Gabriel: God gave us the burden of freedom. You chose your crime. Do you have the courage to choose your penance?

Rodrigo Mendoza: For me there is no redemption, no penance great enough.

Father Gabriel: There is. But do you dare to try it?

Cardinal Altamirano: They must learn to submit to the will of God. Tell them.

Father Gabriel: They say it was the will of God that they came out of the jungle and built the mission. They don't understand why God has changed his mind.

Rodrigo Mendoza: They want to live, Father. … I am a priest, and they need me.

Father Gabriel: Then help them as a priest! If you die with blood on your hands, Rodrigo, you betray everything we've done. You promised your life to God. And God is love!

Governor Hontar: We must work in the world, Your Eminence. The world is thus.

Cardinal Altamirano: No, Señor Hontar. Thus have we made the world. … Thus have I made it.

Thoughts for Discussion

1. Even after his fellow priest is brutally martyred by the Guaraní Indians, Father Gabriel reaches out to the tribe.
   
   What motivates Gabriel's response here? Is he motivated by guilt or by something greater, such as the need to share the truth of the Gospel to all nations? What should our own response be when we hear of men and women dying for their faith?

2. As Mendoza makes his way up the treacherous falls, his heavy bundle of weapons and armor causes him to stumble and nearly plummet to his death. One of the Jesuits, alarmed by the extent of his suffering, speaks on behalf of the brothers, who feel that the penance has gone far enough. However, as the superior of the community, Father Gabriel alone has the authority to end Medonza's suffering. He chooses to wait, saying, “We’re not the members of a democracy, Father. We’re members of an Order.”
   
   What purpose does this hierarchical authority serve? How might such obedience help the brothers create a unified and peaceful community? How does the Jesuits’ acceptance of authority pave the way for diplomacy, both in and outside the missions?

3. Throughout the film, Gabriel insists that the Jesuits be motivated by love, an emotion often dismissed as sentimental and associated with those blinded by their passions.
   
   Does Gabriel's love make him weak? Or, does love — and his ability to see the capacity for love in others — allow him to recognize the dignity of all persons, both European and Guaraní alike, despite the violence, slavery and political corruption that affects both cultures?
4. After he kills his brother, Rodrigo Mendoza is stricken with remorse. While his action was not punishable under the law of his time, he places himself within the confines of the prison. Later, he accepts the challenge Father Gabriel offers: to choose a penance and humble himself before the mercy of God and man.

What motivates Mendoza to undertake such penances? Is he trying to buy absolution? Mendoza does encounter mercy through the acceptance of the Guaraní; what does this say for the human capacity for forgiveness?

5. Grateful for the serene lifestyle of the mission, Mendoza surrenders his freedom to live as a Jesuit, promising to serve the authority of his superior and the pope in regard to the missions.

Despite his new vocation, however, Mendoza's passions still rule him: He breaks his vow and swears to defend the mission by force. His choice is arguably justifiable. It is, in fact, supported by most of his Jesuit brothers. Yet, should one who has broken a vow — a promise made before God — dare to take justice in his own hands? Is he still a coward terrified of his past, who hopes that death will be a penance great enough to redeem him?

6. One of the Portuguese traders compares a Guaraní child to a parrot that has been taught to sing. His harsh comparison reflects a common belief of the time: That Europeans were justified in enslaving the natives because of their various “animalistic” behaviors, particularly their practices of cannibalism and human sacrifice.

What should our response be to such atrocities that deny the dignity of life? Should we resort to violence, anger and suppression, so that others are forced to accept our beliefs? Or, should we instead show them through love and kindness that no human life — from the time of conception until death — is worthless or expendable?

7. After his examination of the missions, the archbishop explains his intent: “To persuade you not to resist the transfer of the mission territories. If the Jesuits resist the Portuguese, then the Jesuit Order will be expelled. ... If your Order is to survive at all, Father, the missions must here be sacrificed.”

Do you think the Jesuits should have retreated, for the sake of their Order? Should we give up on evangelization when it becomes politically inconvenient?

8. As he prepares to help the Indians defend the mission, Father Rodrigo begs Father Gabriel to bless him in his endeavors. The superior refuses, stating, “No. If you're right, you'll have God's blessing. If you're wrong, my blessing won't mean anything.”

Despite his adamant claim that violence betrays everything the missions represent, Gabriel accepts that Rodrigo is acting according to his conscience. How does this conflict give voice to the complex concepts of morality and free will?

9. “Though I have all faith so that I could remove mountains and have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor and though I give my body to be burned and have not love, it profiteth me nothing.”

This passage written by St. Paul, the once violent persecutor of Christians who became a renowned saint, is an appropriate mediation for Mendoza, the mercenary turned priest. The verse becomes more relevant as the film progresses, when most of the Jesuits choose to fight and defend the mission. Do you think they lost the profits of their labor, the mission, because they chose to fight rather than listen to Father Gabriel? Of course, Father Gabriel also loses his life, dying alongside the men, women and children of the mission. What does he profit?

10. The film ends the way it begins, with Cardinal Altamirano looking accusingly out at the viewers, challenging them to think of the missions and his horrific decision.

Did the bishop feel he had any other choice? Was he simply a pawn caught between nations fighting for power and property? What choice do we have when faced with similar conflicts?