

# THE MISSION

Study Guide



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## ❖ Introduction ❖

In the 18th century, Spanish missionaries made their way through the stunningly beautiful jungle of South America to evangelize the native people. As they had done in their other missions throughout the world, the priests and brothers of the Society of Jesus 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, who lived on the upper flats of the jungle, far above the Spanish and Portuguese plantations.

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 fascinates the Guaraní, who quickly welcome the Jesuits to build a mission for their people.

The Mission of San Carlos is peaceful and democratic, 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 Spanish and 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. Racked with guilt after killing his brother in a jealous rage, Mendoza, like the Guaraní, experiences the message of God's repentance under the guidance of Father Gabriel. He leads him to the Guaraní, who cut away the burden — the weapons and armor he once wore when capturing the Indians — that he has dragged up the Igazu Falls as penance for his sins. Mendoza, grateful for their forgiveness, is accepted into the Jesuit Order, 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; they also prevent both the Spanish and Portuguese from establishing a treaty regarding control of the jungle. If the missions remain open, the Jesuits risk the wrath of both European nations, which have pressured 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, the cardinal 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**



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## ❖ 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.

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

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**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?

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

**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.

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**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!

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**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: 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 Rodrigo makes his way up the treacherous falls, his heavy bundle of weapons and armor causes him to stumble and nearly plummet to his death. Father John, alarmed by the extent of his suffering, speaks on behalf of the Jesuits brothers; 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 more unified community and establish a peaceful mission? 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 — that allows Gabriel 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, Roderigo 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 a penance? 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 life in 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 hand? Is he still a coward terrified of his past, hoping that death would 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 attitude of the time: The Europeans were justified in enslaving the natives because of their various "animalistic" behavior, 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: "No. If you're right, you'll have God's blessing. If you're wrong, my blessing won't mean anything."**

Despite Gabriel's adamant claim that violence betrays everything the missions represent, he accepts that Rodrigo is acting accordingly to his conscience, doing what he feels he must. 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 the 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 choose 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? He argues that closing the missions will protect the Jesuit Order — in reality, the Jesuit Order was disbanded throughout most of Europe shortly after the events of the film take place. Was he simply a pawn caught in the political muddle between nations fighting for power and property? What choice do we have when faced with such a conflict? pressures of the law in times of peril, fighting his conscience? Or the man who stays on his post and acts in defense of innocent life?