

'The Mission' raises eternal question of liberation theology

'The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart: devout men are taken away and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death.'

Isaiah 57:1-2

By Emily Morrison

"It's not just a movie," reads the promotional material distributed by Genesee Ecumenical Ministries (GEM) on *The Mission*, the cinematic dramatization of a historical incident that transformed the fortunes of the Jesuit missionary movement in 18th-century South America.

Also billed as "a major motion picture event," "a spiritual experience" and "a film that must be taken seriously," the recently released Warner Brothers drama is indeed all of the above. Its power to draw audiences should help GEM and area parishes or church groups sell advance tickets to benefit local ecumenical missions.

The Mission's value as a spiritual and educational tool inspired Father William McCusker, SJ, a McQuaid Jesuit High School guidance counselor, to offer a training workshop at the school the evening of Thursday, January 29. Participating area lay leaders came to prepare for group discussions they plan to hold after parish groups attend the movie. On the agenda were a number of important contemporary questions raised by this stirring rendition of a turning point in Church history.

From an opening scene set against the dramatic backdrop of Argentina's spectacular Iguazu Falls, where a Jesuit priest lashed by Indians to a crude wooden cross plunges over the falls to his death 200 feet below, the film's audience is swept along on a spiritual collision course between martyrdom and the vow of obedience, liberation theology and nonviolent resistance, Church and state, conscience and political expedience.

Set in the mid-1700s, the film traces the establishment in what was then the Jesuit province of Parag y (which extended into modern Argentina, Bolivia, Uruguay and Brazil) of a confederation of missions known as the "reductions." These utopian communities of Guarani Indians flourished under the spiritual direction of the Jesuits, who built the missions to counteract the decimation of the native population by Portuguese slave traders. Some 30 Jesuit missions had been established in Spanish territory by 1750, when the Treaty of Madrid adjusted the boundary line between lands held by the Spanish and Portuguese empires.

Also known as the "Treaty of Limits" this agreement between Spain and Portugal dictated the expulsion of approximately 30,000



Warner Bros. Inc.

Jesuit priest Father Gabriel (Jeremy Irons) leads the convicted Guarani Indians in prayer. This act of passive resistance took place during an attack by Portuguese troops, in the powerful new motion picture, *The Mission*.

Guarani from seven missions being transferred to Portuguese jurisdiction. Ordered to leave the sanctuary of the missions, the Indians refused, deciding to stand their ground and fight.

Commanded by their superior general to honor their vows of obedience and comply with the order of expulsion, the Jesuits vowed instead to stay behind with the Guarani and face the ensuing battle of conscience against both religious and secular governments.

The Jesuit superior general's emissary, Father Lope Luis Altamirano (portrayed by Ray McAnally in the movie as a cardinal appointed by the pope — one of several departures from history of the film account), was dispatched to Asuncion to determine the fate of the missions. In the movie version, Altamirano writes in a letter to the pope: "A surgeon, to save the body, may have to cut off a limb. But nothing had prepared me for the beauty of the limb I had come to sever."

Under the tutelage of the fictional Jesuit Father Gabriel (Jeremy Irons), the Guarani had put aside their bows and arrows to fashion churches, printing presses, violins prized by European orchestras, and even polyphonic musical compositions. Yet, although Altamirano seemed visibly moved by what the Society of Jesus had wrought out of the primitive rain forest, his private sentiments were not strong

enough to counteract what had by then become widespread opposition to the Jesuit order back in Europe.

The ruthless Marquis of Pombal was then Portuguese minister of state. Rumored to be the real power behind the Portuguese throne, Pombal warned the Vatican that unless the Jesuits complied with the order to dissolve the missions, they would be expelled from Portugal and all her possessions.

Faced with two choices — sacrificing 1,500 Indians or defying the wishes of vastly powerful European monarchs — Altamirano capitulated, ordering the missionaries to leave. *The Mission's* two fictional heroes, Father Gabriel and the repentant former mercenary and slave-trader Rodrigo Mendoza (Robert DeNiro), now a Jesuit convert, faced off against the military might of the Portuguese army in what becomes the film's central impasse. Mendoza's armed resistance versus Gabriel's civil disobedience develop into the classic spiritual dialectic between the spirit and the sword. The results are perhaps predictably devastating, yet surpass the scope of most commercial films in their power to stimulate audiences to discuss and reflect upon the movie's central moral precepts.

At immediate issue, of course, was the eventual suppression of the entire Jesuit order from 1773 to 1814, said Father Bill McCusker, an authority on Jesuit history, at his McQuaid workshop. Following the War of the Seven Reductions, as the battle between the Portuguese and the Guarani was later termed, Pombal triumphed in the end. Under the threat of a schism from Rome, the Portuguese king was persuaded to sign a royal decree in 1759 that confiscated the properties of the Society of Jesus and expelled from Portuguese lands all Jesuits who refused to abandon their vocations.

"Spain followed suit; France had already expelled the Jesuits," Father McCusker explained. "Eventually, the pope abolished all Jesuit missionaries." In 1773, Pope Clement XIV decreed complete dissolution of the order. The Jesuits survived only in Prussia (until 1780) and under the schismatic Catherine the Great of Russia, who highly valued the Jesuits as teachers. After the fall of Napoleon and the release of Pius VII from captivity in France, the brief of suppression was revoked in 1814, when the Society of Jesus was fully restored.

"By 1814, when the restoration came, there were no more (South American) reductions, although the ruins of the missions are now national shrines," said Father McCusker. "The Jesuits eventually returned to South America, but by that time, the Guarani had disappeared or been assimilated."

Beyond minor questions of *The Mission's* relatively few departures from history, Father McCusker delineated two related themes threaded throughout the film version of the Jesuits' expulsion: the crisis of conscience and the unjust exploitation of minority groups.

"Who do you listen to?" he asked rhetorically. "At issue is (the priests') fealty to the Indians, who oppose a treaty in conflict with divine and natural law. Some packed up and left; others put down their rosary beads and took up guns.

"Lingering in the background is the issue of liberation theology," added Father McCusker, who pointed out that group discussion leaders might find themselves weighing the pros and cons of a contemporary theology whose advocates link salvation of the souls of oppressed people with their liberation from economic and political oppression.

"What does a man do who is bound by some type of religious promise, and yet is surrounded by hatred?" Father McCusker asked workshop members to consider. One member of the discussion group theorized that perhaps Mendoza, in taking up his abandoned sword, merely reverted to the last set of values he had held before his conversion, while Father Gabriel, armed only with a monstrosity as he approaches the battle line of the Portuguese, accomplished little more than a moral victory.

Father McCusker's workshop also briefly outlined parallels between the situation in *The Mission* and present-day conflicts in Nicaragua and South Africa. Participants questioned why good people perish while evil seems to triumph, whether some of Christ's actions were perhaps politically charged and even confrontational, and whether the movie's final scene signifies the hope of resurrection beyond suffering and death.

"Does the end justify the means?" one workshop member challenged.

That issue may well be the central question posed by a powerful film whose impact lingers long after viewers leave the theater. To elucidate such important points for teen or adult parishioners, participants planned to hold discussion groups at the Church of the Transfiguration, Our Lady of Lourdes, and the Episcopal parishes of St. Thomas and St. Paul.

Asked whether the movie would be appropriate for younger teens, Father McCusker (who has discussed the film with McQuaid upperclassmen) replied, "A lot depends upon their experience. Any senior high school student should be able to handle it. When kids reach that stage, they begin to think logically and draw illations. They discuss not only the violence, but the value system behind it all."

For parish groups whose members want to experience a similar challenge to their convictions, a study guide prepared for pastors, parents, teachers and lay leaders is available from Genesee Ecumenical Ministries. For further information on organizing a discussion group or raising funds for local missions through advance ticket sales, contact GEM at 17 South Fitzhugh St., Rochester 14614, or call (716)232-5530.

A view of our common mission

The Mission is a powerful statement of what it means to walk in the shoes of the Gospels. The story centers on two men: one a missionary priest blazing a trail through jungles and human hearts, the other a repentant mercenary turned priest. Both find God among the gentle Guarani Indians. Both struggle to answer Christianity's ultimate questions.

When Portuguese soldiers threaten to destroy the mission and its people, the missionary, Mendoza, returns to the way of the sword in defense of his people, while the other, Father Gabriel, remains steadfast in his determination to meet violence with nonviolence. Both priests represent us of love for their flock — and both display extraordinary courage.

Mendoza is driven to fight for the rights of the oppressed in rare examples of the liberation theology rightly applied, while Father Gabriel, both compelled to love victims and persecutors alike.

As the battle unfolded, I found myself praying silently for the Indians and their missionaries. But in the fighting got progressively bloodier, I was reminded of a biblical scene between the two priests. "I don't know if I can't live in a world where I don't..."

plained his need to protect these gentle children of God, and the mission's founder responded with sentiments of love for all.

What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus? And is violence ever an appropriate response of discipleship? These are questions all Christians should face, through the answers are not always so simply arrived at.

One scene in *The Mission* provides a possible response: the scene mentioned above, in which the two priests find themselves locked in dialogue with each other, striving to answer God's call with opposite responses. The scene quickly moves to its climax, with the mission's founder saying, "I don't know if I can't live in a world where I don't..."

With every page of history that's turned, we find one last violence in humanity's response to an oppressor. Such responses are often acted out in the name of God.

The *Mission* raises such questions as: How do we respond to violence? How do we respond to the unjust exploitation of minority groups? How do we respond to the crisis of conscience? How do we respond to the unjust exploitation of minority groups?