

Context of Roland Joffe's Film *The Mission*

Much of the setting for the film *The Mission* is a Jesuit Reduction Mission established among the Guarani Indians of Paraguay in 1758. In pursuing the mission of evangelization among the indigenous tribes in South America, these Jesuit missions were considered communities based on “mutual respect and love built on the pattern of the early Church, Jesuits and natives alike sharing the fruits of their physical and artistic labors” (May, page 42). The themes of slavery, sin, conversion, freedom, and salvation are symbolically and literally present in the unfolding of this story.

The movie is set during a period just after Spain and Portugal signed a treaty that gave the Spanish territory in Paraguay, where several Jesuit missions were maintained, to Portugal. The Portuguese practiced slave trading and continued to enslave the native people. Because the Jesuit missions protected these indigenous peoples, the Portuguese wanted these missions closed. The Pope felt the pressure of losing the support of Portugal if the missions were not closed. He therefore sent his emissary, Cardinal Altamirano, to convince the Jesuits to close the missions on their own. If they failed to do so, the Pope wanted the Cardinal to close the missions himself. While he recognized that he must be obedient to the Pope, Cardinal Altamirano was moved by the joy and faith of those who live in the Jesuit missions.

Toward the conclusion of the film, a poignant confrontation occurs between Cardinal Altamirano and the Portuguese and Spanish envoys after the slaughter of innocent lives:

Cardinal Altamirano says, “And you have the effrontery to tell me that this slaughter is necessary?” . . . “We have no alternatives, your Eminence. We must work in the world and the world is thus.” “No, Señor,” Altamirano responds, “thus have we made the world,” adding with precision and self-knowledge, “Thus have I made it.” (May, page 42)

John May describes this conversation as a “sad confession of our continuing contribution to human history’s sinful structures” (42).

Although social sin and human responsibility are evident in the slavery, violence, and disregard for the dignity of the native people, there is a parallel story of a slave trader caught in the cycle of personal sin. Pride becomes the pivotal sin that leads to death. The self-imprisoned Captain Rodrigo Mendoza finds that he cannot forgive himself. There is a paradoxical moment in the film when the very people whom he once enslaved became his source of freedom, literally and symbolically. Here the moral teachings on sin, repentance, conversion, freedom, and salvation are captured in the lived reality of social conflict and human history.

The source for the historical context in *The Mission* described in this article is John R. May, *Nourishing Faith through Fiction: Reflections of the Apostles' Creed in Literature and Film* (Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 2001), pages 41–42. Copyright © 2001 by John R. May.

