

## **Historical Background and Context to the Film *The Mission***

This week, we are watching and discussing the 1986 award-winning film, *The Mission*. This film was written by Robert Bolt and directed by Roland Joffé. The music was composed by Ennio Morricone. Because of time constraints, I am providing you this historical background in writing.

### **Historical Background**

*The Mission* is based on true historical events that occurred in the borderlands of present-day Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil around 1750. Although this is obviously in South America rather than North America, the depictions of the Indians and the issues surrounding colonization are applicable to our study of the indigenous peoples of the United States.

### **The Guarani**

The Guarani were one of the dominant aboriginal tribes in these areas. Most present-day inhabitants of those areas have some Guarani ancestry and some tribes of Guarani still survive in the rainforest in lifestyles similar to their lifestyles prior to Spanish colonization. In the film *The Mission*, many of the actors are Guarani Indians who were recruited to participate in the film. Before the time of the Spanish conquest, the Guarani were widely scattered throughout the area, living by hunting, fishing, and gathering plant foods. They built homes of thatched huts around a central area or plaza and slept in netted hammocks woven on simple, upright looms. In the first half of the 16th century, the Spanish came to Guarani territory in search of gold, and Jesuit missionaries came later hoping to convert the Guarani to Christianity.

### **The Jesuits**

The Jesuits are a religious order of men in the Roman Catholic Church. They were founded by the Spanish saint Ignatius of Loyola in 1534 (partially in response to the Protestant Revolution, which was begun by Luther in Germany in 1517). They are one of the most rigorous, highly educated, and demanding of the religious orders. Education has been the order's chief activity almost from the outset, and Jesuits' have made notable contributions to scholarship in both theology and the secular disciplines. Jesuits take five simple vows, among them strict obedience and the renunciation of ecclesiastical office beyond their order.

The development of the Jesuit order was rapid. Its members took leading parts in the Counter Reformation (the Roman Catholic response to Protestantism) establishing schools and colleges throughout Europe. For 150 years they were the leaders in

European education; by the time of *The Mission* they had more than 650 colleges throughout Europe and, in addition, the order had total or partial charge of 24 universities. In the mission field the expansion of the order was equally great. Missions were established in India, Japan, China and Africa. The most famous work of the Jesuit missionaries in the "New World," however, was the establishment in South American provinces.

The history of the Jesuit order was marked by a steadily increasing prejudice against it. Their devotion to the pope called forth opposition from nationalistic rulers and leaders who wanted to undermine the influence of the church. Their zeal for ecclesiastical reform antagonized the clergy. At one time or another, the order has been expelled from every country in Europe. This antagonism was at its height in 1750, when Europe was under the great political and social class strain that eventually erupted in the American (1776) and French (1789) revolutions.

## **Spain and Portugal**

At the time described in the movie, the area of the Mission of San Carlos had been under Spanish rule but was in the process of being sold to the Portuguese. Spain had been a pivotal force in European politics for over two centuries, and had had the strongest hold in the New World, successfully preventing the other European powers from establishing colonies there. One of Spain's greatest enemies had been England. In 1580, the Spanish King had a great naval fleet (armada) constructed and in 1588 sent it against England. The great Spanish Armada was defeated in the English Channel, and most of the surviving ships were completely wrecked in a storm. With the destruction of the Armada, Spanish power and prestige began a relentless decline and England was finally able to successfully establish colonies in present-day United States ("New England"). By 1600, Spain was saddled by oppressive taxation and burdened by the power of the Roman Catholic Inquisition (the arm of the church that was trying to destroy Protestantism).

The prestige and power of Spain continued to decrease throughout the 17th century. By 1750, Spain was forced to sell some of its colonies to other countries. The area that is home to the Mission of San Carlos was sold to the Portuguese through the Treaty of Madrid. By this time, Spain was no longer in the slave trade, but Portugal still was. By selling the area to Portugal, the wealthy Spanish colonists in the areas of the mission hoped to conquer the remaining areas of the Guarani Indians and not only have access to their lands, but also be able to enslave any Indians they could capture.