

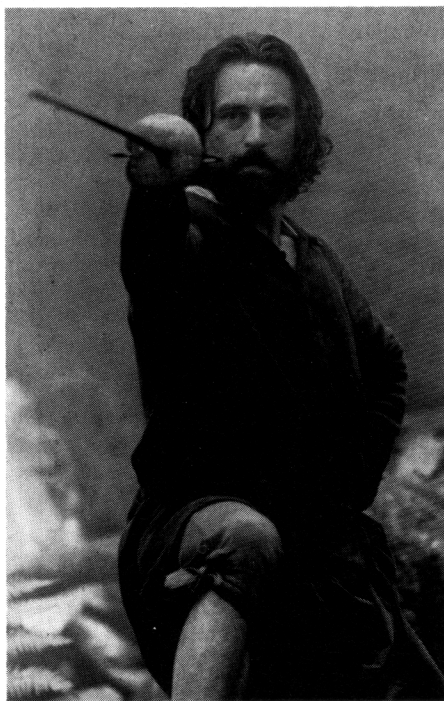
To the Greater Glory of God

Ours is an age of pointless exercise. Witness the widespread enthusiasm for the marathon. Never before have so many Americans put their bodies through such rigors solely for the sake of being able to say that they have. Whenever a means to an end becomes an end in itself, our priorities have been perverted, our perspective distorted. Exercise for exercise's sake, schooling for schooling's sake, art for art's sake, ritual for ritual's sake — each is an empty activity.

This is not to deny that activity is a need of human nature, that men and women need — in the broad sense of the term — an occupation, something to keep them busy. It is abundantly clear that people need goals and challenges and that we are most happy when most is demanded of us. But activity in and of itself does not suffice. We need to feel not only that we are *doing* something, but also that we are *accomplishing* something. We need a *reason* for our activity.

The absence of a sense of accomplishment, the absence even of a sense of challenge, may explain the precipitous decline in religious vocations over the past few decades. When nothing is demanded of the religious, when life in the holy orders is scarcely distinguishable from secular life, there is little wonder that monastics and would-be monastics begin to doubt the value of vocations. For what they are seeking, what they are failing to find, is a sense of mission.

That people today, religious and non-religious alike, are desperately searching for a sense of mission is reflected in the visceral appeal of a new movie called *The Mission*. The film has all the elements of success. Its two stars, Jeremy Irons and Robert De Niro, are highly acclaimed dramatic actors. Its director and its producers demonstrated their commitment to excellence with their last offerings — Roland Joffé with *The Killing Fields* and Fernando Ghia and David Puttnam with *Chariots of Fire*. Writer Robert Bolt had previously penned the scripts for *A Man for All Seasons*, *Doctor Zhivago*, and *Lawrence of Arabia*. And the film has already garnered the imprimatur of the culturati, the Best Picture Award at the



**Robert De Niro as Mendoza,
a slave trader turned Jesuit**

the 1986 Cannes Film Festival. Yet, what gives *The Mission* its powerful emotional appeal is its compelling portrayal of two men who risk everything not for the vanity and the thrill of confronting danger and pain, but because they believe that their principles require them to do so.

Jeremy Irons plays Father Gabriel, a Jesuit priest sent to the jungles of South America to convert a tribe of Indians to Catholicism. Robert De Niro plays Rodrigo Mendoza, a former slave trader and fratricide who accompanies Father Gabriel, desiring fervently to make amends for his villainous past by ministering to the Indians with all the zeal with which he formerly persecuted them. The mission is a success and flourishes, enriching the material and spiritual lives of the Indians, until a papal delegate arrives from Rome and orders the Jesuits to abandon their outpost.

The film is based on the true story of the Jesuit Mission Reductions in Paraguay, established in the 18th Century in Spanish territory later ceded to Portugal. Although the Portuguese warned that

the Jesuits would be expelled from Portugal and her overseas possessions unless they closed their missions in this territory — and a papal delegate sent to decide the fate of the missions agreed that they must be sacrificed to protect the broader interests of the Church — the Jesuits refused to abandon their charges. The Portuguese subsequently slaughtered the Indians and drove out their Jesuit benefactors.

Father Gabriel and Mendoza, who has become a Jesuit, are faced with a moral dilemma: They must either violate their vows of obedience to the Pope or forsake their hard-won converts. Both men disobey, one actively, one passively. Mendoza reverts to his combative ways and defends the Indians of the mission with his sword. Father Gabriel adopts a non-violent course, gathering the women and children together in worship as the soldiers approach. Both men are killed in the massacre.

The makers of *The Mission* are to be commended for refusing to offer simple answers to the complex questions the film raises for popular consideration, questions that have troubled the most brilliant theologians for centuries: Can the demands of religion be reconciled with social and political realities? Must the Church compromise with her enemies in order to survive? When conscience and authority conflict, which does one obey? And, despite its several weaknesses — the ambiguous implications of passing references to infanticide and Socialism, the absence of any substantial presentation of Catholic ritual or dogma (which surely would not have been out of place in a movie about Catholic missionaries), and the very real possibility that the film will be misinterpreted as an endorsement of liberation theology — *The Mission* should encourage the recollection of that forgotten purpose that is missing from the lives of people who feel that they are doing much but accomplishing little. If so, *The Mission* will redound — as the Jesuits pray all their actions will — to the greater glory of God. ■

— F. R. DUPLANTIER