

Martin Scorsese directs movie about Jesuit mission to 17th-century Japan

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August 11, 2014

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(RNS) Although evangelical moviemakers have been in the spotlight lately, at least one other prominent, mainstream director is also turning—or returning—to religion.

Martin Scorsese, whose 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ* ignited national controversy, is negotiating with Paramount Studios to distribute a new movie about Jesuit missionaries, according to the show business newspaper Variety.

The historical drama *Silence*, stars Andrew Garfield and Liam Neeson and begins shooting in Taiwan later this year. Based on Shusaku Endo's 1980 novel of the same name, it's a dark, true tale set in 17th-century Japan.

The Jesuit order sends a young priest (Garfield) to find his Portuguese mentor who has been missing for 10 years. Rome believes the older Jesuit (Neeson) may have renounced his faith under torture during the severe persecution of Christian missionaries and converts.

This is the third time Hollywood studio and serious directors have attempted to capture the Jesuits' efforts beyond Europe:

- In 1986, director Roland Joffe made *The Mission*, from Robert Bolt's original screenplay. Its cast (Jeremy Irons, Robert De Niro) included small parts played by a young Neeson and the real-life, rebellious Jesuit priest Daniel Berrigan. "The Mission" tells the (mostly) true story of 18th-century Jesuit missionaries who died defending Guarani Indians from Portuguese slavery in the South American jungle. The film, which surfaced recently on cable's Sundance Channel, won an Oscar for cinematography, and the Grand Prize at Cannes.
- In 1991, director Bruce Beresford filmed *Black Robe*, which Brian Moore adapted from his novel of the same name. The brutal film depicts a French Jesuit's dogged but ultimately failed work among the Iroquois, Algonquin, and Huron in 17th-century Quebec. It illustrates that, when culture contact is involved, even the best intentions can yield disaster.

What accounts for this continuing cinematic fascination with the Jesuits, especially now, with the first Jesuit pope, and an increasingly progressive Latin American at that?

It's possible—and probably likely—that Hollywood's Jesuit attraction is as much ideological as theological.

In *The Mission*, the character who played the Vatican's emissary, charged with ordering the Spanish Jesuits to abandon their communal agricultural settlements, complains about "Jesuit contempt for the authority of the state." But, as a former Jesuit himself, the cardinal also acknowledges that "the paradise of the poor never pleases those who rule above them."

In *Silence*, which is scheduled to open in the fall of 2015, the Japanese feudal lords are just as threatened by the Jesuits as are the Portuguese in *The Mission*.

The Rev. Antoni Ucerler, a Jesuit historian who has consulted on the film with Scorsese and his production team, points out that it was the loyalty of local Christians to a "divine Lord" that transcended the iron rule of the Tokugawa shoguns that authorities feared most. "Such a faith undermined the entire system of absolute rule," he said. "For this reason they called it the 'evil teaching.'"

All three films depict the order's willingness to incorporate, rather than simply condemn, indigenous practices some in Rome considered anathema.

Jesuits also allowed prayer in native languages and rejected coerced conversions. The Rev. Thomas J. Reese notes that, just as Christianity moved away from its Jewish character when its geographic center shifted from the Middle East to Europe, so Jesuit missionaries adapted when they brought the gospel to North and South America, and to Asia.

"Jesuit missionaries were on the forefront of globalization before the term became trendy," Reese said. "Their lives and ministries dramatized the meeting of civilizations. . . . What was a personal encounter in their time is global in ours. Today we face the same religious, cultural, and moral issues they did but on a global scale. That's high drama."

The Jesuits attempted to assimilate or transform the local culture. For example, they saw Chinese ancestor "worship" as veneration—similar to Europeans praying to

saints—and therefore acceptable.

Competing orders—like the more conservative Franciscans and Dominicans—complained to the Vatican that the Jesuits' syncretism gave them an unfair advantage in gaining converts. They claimed the Jesuits ignored, if not accepted, practices like infanticide, promiscuity, divorce, remarriage, and nature worship.

Church leaders went back and forth on the issue, but on a 1987 visit to Chile, Pope John Paul II seemed to side with the early Jesuits, telling a gathering of Mapuche Indians he wanted “to encourage the Mapuches to conserve with a healthy pride the culture of their people; the traditions and customs, the language and their own values.”