

# Silence

A Book Review by John Fahy

Martin Scorsese's controversial Catholicism is known to all who love his films. His newest, called *Silence*, draws from the similarly complex faith displayed by the 20th Century Japanese Catholic author, Shusaku Endo. Endo's 1966 book, also titled *Silence*, is profound and satisfying, even while leaving more questions than answers. I first read *Silence* over ten years ago, and it remains one of only a handful of books I return to over and over. Scorsese's movie has a similar depth and appeal. For the earnest Catholic viewer (or reader!), *Silence* will puzzle, frustrate, and console you --- sometimes all three in the same moment!

The narrative follows two Portuguese Jesuit priests missioned to Japan in the late 1630s. They arrive in a nation where Christians --- especially priests --- are targeted for forced apostasy, torture, and death. Fr. Rodrigues and Fr. Garrpe become deeply enmeshed in the underground "Kirishitan" movement. They meet Mokichi and Ichizo, some of the most valiant and dignified of the Japanese Christians. Kichijiro, a pathetic apostate and drunkard, becomes their unreliable guide. Eventually, they confront the depraved Japanese magistrate Inoue, mastermind of the most violent persecutions against Christians.

Reviews of the new movie are all around us. [Bishop Robert Barron](#) lauds its "gorgeous cinematography, outstanding performances... gripping narrative, and... thematic complexity". Catholic film commentator [Steven Graydanus](#) called it an "intensely Catholic film" that "tells no one exactly what they want to hear... and poses a challenge for viewers of any faith or of none, or of any culture or ethnicity, even if the challenge is not the same for everyone." Sr. Rose Pacatte, director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies in Los Angeles, wrote several positive and precise articles about the film for the [National Catholic Reporter](#). I myself am no movie critic, so I'll leave these sort of reviews to those others. Instead, I'd like to propose four theological lessons that *Silence* seems to teach, and one error that viewers should be careful of. I'll rely on my experiences with the book and the movie alike, and while I haven't revealed the central climax, I apologize in advance for a few minor spoilers.

## Charity is Central

Early on in *Silence*, Rodrigues and Garrpe receive word from Japan that Fr. Ferreira, their former mentor, has repudiated the faith. Everyone's first reaction is, of course, dismay. By all accounts, Ferreira is a spiritual powerhouse and a hero of a man. If he has been broken by the inquisition, then things in Japan are truly despairing. The Jesuits set out to Japan, in part to find Ferreira and rebuild his reputation, but later sadly discover that his apostasy is very real, if more complex than first proposed. The ordinary assumption made by Western Christians was that the apostates were faithless and cowardly. The only reason they imagined for denying the faith was too much love of self and the world, insufficient love of Christ, and insufficient care for the flock of impressionable Japanese Christians. Ferreira insists to the contrary --- that his apostasy was exactly motivated by Christian virtue, fidelity to Christ's mission, and love for his Japanese flock, whose torture was ended when Ferreira committed the "mere formality" of trampling on an image of Christ (called the *fumie*).

Set aside the moral question for a short while. We'll pick it up later. Attend instead to the *motivations* of Rodrigues, Garrpe, and Ferreira: concern for their fellow man brings each of them to a painful, decisively dangerous situation, and in every case, it's *love* that motivates their answer. *Silence* is chock full of loving men and women who respond intensely to others' suffering. Even if we reject apostasy, we struggle to reconcile that with the sincere love Ferreira appears to have. In this way, Endo (and Scorsese) remind us of the message of Matthew 25: love and care for the vulnerable are the central moral requirement of the faith. *Silence* provides a gripping and emotional reminder that the works of mercy and a heart of love for neighbor are core Christian precepts.

### **The Priest is Nothing and Everything**

St. Norbert is credited with the adage that the priest is "nothing and everything." He is everything because of what God does to him and through him, and he is nothing because of what his own servant heart does by giving away his life for his flock and his will for God's will.

O Priest, who are you?

You are not yourself because you are God.

You are not of yourself because you are the servant and minister of Christ.

You are not your own because you are the spouse of the Church.

You are not yourself because you are the mediator between God and man.

You are not from yourself because you are nothing.

What then are you? Nothing and everything.

The portrayal of priesthood in *Silence* must challenge some of its secular and non-Catholic viewers. The Japanese people have a lionizing love for their newly arrived "padres." When Garrpe and Rodrigues first arrive in Tomogi, dozens of Christians gather to watch their midnight entry into the ramshackle village. A decade has passed since the sacraments have been available to them (outside baptism, of course, which any person can administer). The priests' days are full with Christians risking their life for clandestine Masses, confessions, and spiritual counsel. The people pine for any tangible symbol of the priests and their faith, even to the point of disassembling the men's rosaries as a kind of relic. Though the government has offered an enormous bounty for betraying a priest, the huge majority of Japanese are resolute in protecting them, even to death.

Imagine the difficulty of that decade the Japanese had no priest. Most of us find an hour's wait for confession too onerous, but perhaps most Christians in history have gone months or years without the sacraments. *Silence* inspired me to gratitude on this account. Because of God's grace, our priest is powerful enough to bring Christ down from heaven to the altar for us. He is our privileged access to God's mercy and his salvation. He really is everything.

Further, Rodrigues and Garrpe certainly live to become "nothing." As described just above, they give away everything to make the year-long journey to Japan, knowing that they would likely never return. In this sense, they are "martyred" early in the story, while they are still very much alive. They loved profoundly, and seem to have saved many souls at great personal expense. The service of these men shows the truth of these words of St. John Eudes: "The worthy priest is the living image of Christ in this world, of Christ watching, praying, preaching, catechizing, working, weeping, going from town to town, from village to village, suffering, agonizing, sacrificing

Himself and dying for the souls created to His image and likeness.” Much like Christ emptied himself, becoming obedient to death, becoming nothing, so too do these priests.

### Faith is Mysterious

Remember that the Japanese insist that the *fumie* is only a formality. There are several characters in the narrative who have stepped on the *fumie* and renounced their faith, but who appear to still live a private Christian life. Ferreira has left active ministry, participates in anti-Christian apologetics, and assists in the prosecution of missionaries. And yet signs point to a deep faith that he nourishes privately, and with a broken heart. Kichijiro, the flaky companion and guide to the priests, is a known apostate; and yet he makes a rocky return to the faith time and time again. Do these men really believe? Do they have faith? Are they truly repentant? *We don't know!* This is one of the greatest compliments I can pay to *Silence* --- the mystery of faithfulness is left mysterious. The apostates we meet are equal parts heart-breaking and alluring. They repudiated the only unalloyed good in Japan, but they did so from an impossible dilemma. What does it mean to be a secretly faithful member of an undeniably missionary religion? How can we resolve the tension between the apparent holiness of those who hide their faith with the apparent wickedness of those who publicly deny it? If refusing the *fumie* means death, but trampling allows a life of secret evangelization, which truly advances the Kingdom of God? These are the central questions of *Silence*.

Some suggest that Endo and Scorsese (especially Scorsese) are pressing the easy answer on their audience --- that apostasy is okay when it's only a loving formality. Let's not endorse that answer --- hang tight another few paragraphs for a more complete treatment. But it would be likewise too easy to insist the opposite: that the only kind of faith is the unflinching heroism of Ichizo and Mokichi, the martyrs at Tomogi. There is something about the cowardly and weak faith of Kichijiro --- who fails over and over but keeps coming back --- that speaks deeply to me, and perhaps to most of us.

### Mercy is Endless

“Eternal God, in whom mercy is endless and the treasury of compassion — inexhaustible, look kindly upon us and increase Your mercy in us, that in difficult moments we might not despair nor become despondent, but with great confidence submit ourselves to Your holy will, which is Love and Mercy itself.”

The closing prayer of the Divine Mercy Chaplet is written on every page of *Silence*. God's mercy is endless. The treasury of God's compassion is inexhaustible.

One of the key themes that Endo wrote was the silence of God --- that God seems to have nothing to say to the suffering Christians of Japan, nor to Rodrigues and Garrpe. Finally, Rodrigues does clearly hear a voice he identifies with Christ. What the voice brings is the same as the message brought to St. Faustina: love and mercy, compassion and confidence. (It's worth noting that the voice may very well be Rodrigues' own self-justification --- this is an ambiguity the story leaves us with. But the message's source in mercy is no less Christian.)

Kichijiro (in my opinion, the underrated and most important character in the story) is the patron saint of mercy, especially in the movie's depiction. His sacramental confessions are like mile

markers in the film, and his outright desperation to be virtuous, even in his moments of greatest weakness, are the most human depiction of any character. In a surprising way, I think this unreliable drunken coward may be the true hero of *Silence*. Unlike the ambiguous Ferreira, Kichijiro seems plainly to be moving towards God and towards salvation, if by fits and starts. And unlike Ichizo and Mokichi, whose salvation is by heroism, Kichijiro's is by mercy alone.

A friend of mine found this loving, merciful message so important and surprising that *Silence* may bring him back to a Church he'd previously found harsh and unwelcoming. Perhaps you could pray for him, and for all of us who need God's abundant mercy.

### **Evil Cannot Develop into Good**

Finally, let's lay bare the moral hazard of *Silence*: one can read it as a justification of apostasy. Maybe those who apostatize are right because their apostasy saves lives and continues the underground faith.

Don your moral theologian hat and you'll find two big issues with this argument: first, apostasy is simply never justified. Per the [Catechism](#):

The first commandment requires us to nourish and protect our faith with prudence and vigilance, and to reject everything that is opposed to it. There are various ways of sinning against faith, including apostasy, the total repudiation of the Christian faith.

In [Matthew's Gospel](#), Jesus offers one of his clearest moral teachings when treating this topic:

You will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles... Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved... Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell... Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

Second, to choose evil for certain material effects -- no matter how great the effects -- is a kind of moral reasoning called consequentialism or proportionalism. This philosophy has never been acceptable for Christians, and was most clearly repudiated in St. John Paul II's encyclical letter [Veritatis Splendor](#):

Consequentialism claims to draw the criteria of the rightness of a given way of acting solely from a calculation of foreseeable consequences deriving from a given choice. Proportionalism proceeds by weighing the various values and goods being sought, focusing on the proportion between the good and bad effects of that choice, with a view to the "greater good" or "lesser evil" actually possible in a particular situation. Such theories are not faithful to the Church's teaching when they believe they can morally justify choices that are deliberately contrary to the divine and natural law.

Consequentialism and proportionalism would have us believe that our bad choices are sometimes good because they are fortunate, or because they end up in the right way, or because the ends can

justify the means. The truth cannot tolerate that error, and admittedly, *Silence* seems to traffic in it.

This is not to deny that sometimes good *does* come from evil in a different sense. The cross is the best example --- it is the happiest, most grace-filled sin ever committed. God is a master of making lemonade from the lemons we offer Him in our evil choices. In this sense alone can good be said to come from evil, and never because good and evil are somehow unified. C.S. Lewis put the distinction like this in his book *The Great Divorce*:

I do not think that all who choose wrong roads perish; but their rescue consists in being put back on the right road. A sum can be put right: but only by going back til you find the error and working it afresh from that point, never by simply going on. Evil can be undone, but it cannot 'develop' into good. Time does not heal it.

At the end of the book and the movie (especially the movie), Endo and Scorsese may be suggesting that the characters' apostasies are made good by the passage of time and the cessation of hostilities. I don't want to say much more than that for fear of spoiling the movie, but suffice it to say that this cannot be so --- evil and good are not balanced on a scale, or part of the same branch on our life's tree. Evil cannot become good simply by its being in the right scenario and with sufficient time. Evil is undone by repentance and mercy. Is there repentance in *Silence*? I don't know, but you should certainly watch or read to find out.

None of this is to say that the choices made in *Silence* should have been easy, or that the characters are unforgivable! The sympathetic treatment of people who are objectively sinning is, quite simply, real. Sinners are sympathetic! Jesus treated them as such. While our sympathy shouldn't be allowed to fool our consciences, there's no need to resist the complexity that *Silence* offers; perhaps that is the best way to describe the story's spirituality. It is about a particular time and place, but also fundamentally about every sin and doubt, every life of faith and virtue, every error, and every act of contrition. *Silence* is about us and the mercy of God --- all complex, vexing, beautiful, and consoling.

---

*John Fahy has a Master's degree in Theology, and he is Assistant Principal for Student Affairs and a member of the theology faculty at Strake Jesuit College Prep. With his wife Angelica and their three children, John is grateful every day to live and work in holy communities like Jesuit and St. John Vianney.*