



FAITH STRIPPED to its ESSENCE

A Discordant Pilgrimage
through Shūsaku Endō's *Silence*

PATRICK T. REARDON

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

MARK 15:34

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INTRODUCTION

There is a mystery at the heart of Shusaku Endo's 1966 novel *Silence*, and it is this: Father Sebastian Rodrigues, a seventeenth-century Jesuit priest from Portugal, steals into Japan during a time of terror-filled, bloody repressions of Christianity in which hundreds of believers in Jesus are routinely tortured and executed. He lives in hiding, providing the sacraments when and where he can to communities of Christians who, at great peril, have kept their faith alive in secret. As one of the few priests still in Japan, he is a symbol of the Church, a beacon and a model for those who come to him for spiritual solace and support. Yet, in the end, he goes against all that he has stood for.

In the end, psychologically assaulted by his captors, shaken to his core by the sounds of Christians moaning over the torture pit just a short distance away, he goes through a Japanese ceremony for rejecting his faith. To show his rejection of his beliefs, he ritually steps on — “tramples” — a worn, wooden image of Jesus, a *fumi-e*.

He does this not to save himself from physical torture, but because he has been told that, unless he apostatizes, the Christians he can hear moaning in a nearby torture chamber will suffer more and will die, and will be followed by others.

For other Christians, particularly his religious superiors back in Europe, this act is a violation of his faith. It is a betrayal.

Yet, during the next three decades until his death, when Rodrigues is being held under house arrest and writes, as he is ordered, a book disavowing Christianity, he refuses to see himself as a betrayer.

“Lord,” he says in prayer, “you alone know that I did not renounce my faith.”

This is the mystery. Is Rodrigues deceiving himself? Is he wildly deluded about what he has done and what it means? Is he a craven coward who cannot even face — or does not even realize — the consequences of his actions?

Or is he right?

Is there some way that, in rejecting his faith — in trampling on the image of Jesus — Rodrigues has mined a deeper faith?

Is he right when he says that he did what Jesus would have done? Or is he kidding himself?



Silence is a novel about the meaning of faith and the expression of faith. It is also the basis of the motion picture directed by Martin Scorsese.

Both the novel and the movie offer a doorway for individuals and groups to enter into the questions Endo raises about the world then and our world now, about Catholicism, Christianity, and all the various religious belief systems and about how they relate to one another.

What are we required to do because of our faith? What does it mean to believe?

Silence is a novel filled with a cacophony of voices arguing and agonizing about faith. Rodrigues is the central character of the book, but there are many others — his colleague Father Francis Garrpe, his teacher and fellow apostate Father Christovao Ferreira, the Japanese Christians these priests came to serve, the Judas-like Kichijiro, and Inoue, the clever, Christian-trained official leading the persecutions.

In this pilgrimage through the discordant voices of faith in Endo's novel, there are chapters devoted to each of the main characters and their own experience of belief. And there are several chapters that center on Rodrigues. These characters are all believers in one way or another, but they are far from unified in their approach. Just as we are.

Some stories from *Silence* are recorded several times here, each time from the perspective of a different character. In a way, this commentary takes the novel apart and puts it back together again in order to

highlight the distinctly different answers that its characters arrive at when faced with the question of faith.

Faith in *Silence* is a life-and-death question.

What is required by faith? What does it mean to believe? What are the costs?

Is Rodrigues a sinner?

Or a saint?

Patrick T. Reardon
Chicago, Illinois

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Each of the twelve chapters in this book ends with a set of questions. These are not extraneous. Rather, they are an extension of each chapter's theme and presentation.

Endo's *Silence* is a novel of questions. Knotty, painful questions that Father Sebastian Rodrigues must face, and knotty questions that the story raises for every reader.

These end-of-chapter questions are integral to my commentary on the novel, integral to this pilgrimage through *Silence*. They are all implicit in the story that Endo has written — and in the life of belief that each human being is called to lead.

These questions are offered for use in personal reflection and in group discussion. They are reminders that *Silence* isn't only a story about Rodrigues. It is also our story, and the questions about faith that the novel raises are our questions. These are questions we have to face in our own lives, questions about what has meaning for us and what faith requires of us.



In *Silence*, Rodrigues, Francis Garrpe, and Christovao Ferreira are Catholic missionaries in Japan. The Japanese people who have been baptized by them and by other European priests are Catholics as well.

Nonetheless, Shusaku Endo refers to them by the more general term as “Christians.”

He does this, I think, for two reasons.

First, he wants to emphasize the sharp cultural differences between Europe and Japan as embodied in religious faith. In the novel, Christianity is seen as an expression of the European world and mind-set that is alien to the Japanese way of life and way of thinking. For Endo, the important fact isn't that Rodrigues and the others are Catholics,

rather than Lutherans, for example, but that they are European Christians rather than Japanese Buddhists.

Second, the central question for Rodrigues is this: What would Jesus do? By using the term “Christians” throughout *Silence*, Endo is emphasizing the connection between the faith proclaimed by the priests and the Christ whose teaching is the basis of that faith.

In deference to Endo, I use the term “Christian” rather than “Catholic” in my examination of and commentary on *Silence* in the following pages.



It is also worth noting that Endo is often careless in the minor details of his storytelling.

Numbers, for instance, don't always match, such as the number of Christians who are ordered to apostatize in the prison before the one-eyed man is killed. Similarly, the details of the life of Father Christovao Ferreira in Japan and Portugal as laid out in the novel don't quite mesh, and some aspects of the torture in the pit, as Endo describes them, seem to be incomplete or, at least, unclear.

In the following pages, I have chosen, for the most part, not to point out such discrepancies.

PART ONE

FAITH

*“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding,
Who determined its measurements — surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”*

JOB 38:4-7

CHAPTER ONE

THE FAITH OF FATHER FRANCIS GARRPE

Father Sebastian Rodrigues is not alone when he is smuggled into Japan in the face of religious persecution and ultimately is pushed to the psychic limit at the edge of the torture pit. With him is another Jesuit missionary, Father Francis Garrpe, who confronts many of the same terrors and threats.

Nearly all of *Silence* is presented in Rodrigues' words and from his point of view. Shusaku Endo puts the reader inside the heart and mind of the priest as he struggles to live out his Christian beliefs and ideals. The result is a richly nuanced portrait of a man who is forced to confront the meaning of his life.

By contrast, Garrpe's personality, faith, and trials are sketched with a few quick brushstrokes. Yet, in sharing the same travails, Garrpe provides a clear-cut counterpoint to Rodrigues.

As Endo spells out early in the novel, the two men are friends and former classmates at the Jesuit seminary in the ancient Campolide monastery outside of Lisbon. It was there that they were taught theology by Father Christovao Ferreira, a veteran missionary and a man they greatly admired. Ferreira was an imposing figure known for his "gentle charity," a tall man with a full chestnut beard that gave him "an air of kindness combined with gravity." His clear blue eyes, slightly hollowed, were set in a face that seemed to glow with "soft radiant light."

Now, though, reports have been received that, under threat of torture, Ferreira, known for his "indomitable courage," has denied the Christian faith and become an apostate.

Rodrigues and Garrpe as well as a friend and former classmate, Father Juan de Santa Maria, cannot understand why their revered teacher would abase himself before his persecutors rather than accept

“a glorious martyrdom.”

So, even though they are only in their late twenties or early thirties, they propose to their superiors that they sail for Japan, smuggle themselves into the country, and find out the truth about Ferreira. When they obtain grudging approval, the priests sail east and more than a year later finally arrive in May of 1639 in the Portuguese-controlled city of Macao on the coast of China, across from Hong Kong.

“Sheep without a shepherd”

In Macao, however, the Jesuit rector Father Valignano initially refuses to permit them to cross to Japan, insisting that it is too dangerous. The three, especially Garrpe, respond with eloquent arguments about the need for them to risk their lives in the face of terrible persecution. As Santa Marta tells the rector, the mission isn't only to find out what happened to Ferreira: “In that stricken land, the Christians have lost their priests and are like a flock of sheep without a shepherd.”

Valignano is swayed, but only Garrpe and Rodrigues are able to go. Wracked by fevers, Santa Marta is very sick, completely worn out by their arduous journey and a case of malaria. He stays behind and, as Rodrigues notes in a letter to his superiors in Portugal, is likely to be able to live a safe and happy life while his friends suffer at the hands of pagans.

Before Rodrigues and Garrpe sail, they find a Japanese peasant in his late twenties named Kichijiro who is willing to lead them to a Christian community near Nagasaki, but he is far from an ideal guide. A drunken fisherman with a crafty look in his eyes, he staggers into the room to meet them, dressed in rags.

During the meeting and in later scenes, Garrpe shows himself to be a question-asker and someone who is prone to emotional outbursts.

With Kichijiro, Garrpe takes the role of an interrogator, insistently

demanding with increasing bitterness again and again that the man say if he is a Christian. But, despite describing the torture of twenty-four Christians on the island of Kyushu near Nagasaki, Kichijiro won't answer Garrpe's question. Later, the Jesuit continues his interrogation but again gets no response. Clearly exasperated, Garrpe even asks the man if he is Japanese. No answer.

When the two priests finally are taken in a small boat on a dark night to the Japanese mainland, Kichijiro is the first to wade ashore. The two Jesuits are left in the shadows by the water, and when they hear the sounds of a passing woman, the danger of their situation hits them.

With tears in his eyes, Garrpe tells Rodrigues that "the weak-minded coward" will never come back. They've been abandoned. He even quotes from the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: "A band of soldiers went there with lanterns and torches and weapons."

Soon, though, a group of Christians from the village of Tomogi emerge out of the dark. Kichijiro is with them.

The Jesuits are hidden in a charcoal hut on a hill above the village, and, when some Christians come to visit, Garrpe again is asking questions, this time about what has been happening in the Christian community in the six years since they've had a priest to serve them. Later, when two women bring food, they giggle as they watch the men eat, prompting an angry Garrpe to ask, "Are we so queer? Is our way of eating so funny?"

Rodrigues and Garrpe are under intense stress. For their protection and the protection of the village, the two priests are cooped up in the hut throughout each long day and only see their flock at night when the believers are able to furtively make their way up the hill through the trees. Rodrigues and Garrpe know that they could be discovered at any moment by Japanese officials who will torture them. They spend their long days in a kind of terrified boredom, picking at the lice that infest their bodies.

One day, the two young men have had enough, and joyfully, boyishly, they step out of the hut into the sunlight and fresh air where they take off their kimonos and let the sun wash over them. This becomes a daily routine, and Garrpe is filled with happiness, nicknaming the hut their “monastery” and relishing their walks through the woods.

Then, to their shock, they’re spotted by two men, and they fear they’ve endangered themselves and their flock. That night, someone is at the door of their hut. “Padre, Padre,” a voice whispers. Rodrigues goes to open the door, but Garrpe calls him an “idiot” and tells him to stop.

Rodrigues opens the door anyway, and the men outside, the ones who spotted them in the woods, turn out to be emissaries from the Christian community on the island of Fukazawa in the Goto Islands, about sixty miles away.

The men ask for one of the priests to come and minister to their town. After consulting with the fearful Christians from Tomogi, Rodrigues goes to Fukazawa for a five-day visit while Garrpe stays behind.

Although Rodrigues comes back as scheduled, the two Jesuits are soon forced to go their separate ways.

“Lord, hear our prayer!”

In two successive raids, soldiers and samurai, tipped off by an informer, scour the village for evidence of Christianity and take four hostages. Later, from hiding, Rodrigues and Garrpe learn how two of the four are martyred. Rather than remain hiding in their hut (and endangering the village even more), the priests resolve to go out, each in his own direction, to find other Christians to serve, regardless of the risk. And so they part.

It is not until Rodrigues has been captured and held in prison that

he sees Garrpe again.

It is a horrific moment.

Rodrigues has been taken out of the prison and brought to a pine grove with a view of a nearby beach. He is told to sit on a stool and wait. As he does, a man he knows only as the interpreter begins to gleefully taunt him. He tells Rodrigues that he will soon have a chance to see Garrpe once again.

In the distance, the Jesuit sees a group of prisoners being walked up the gray beach. In front, bound together in chains, are three Christians, one of whom is a woman he knows as Monica. Behind them is Garrpe.

On the beach, the guards begin to wrap in three prisoners tightly in straw mats, covering their whole bodies except their heads and feet in a way that makes them look like “basket worms.” They are awkward and virtually immobile.

The interpreter explains to Rodrigues that the officials on the beach are telling Garrpe that he has a choice to make. If he rejects his Christian beliefs and “tramples” on the *fumi-e*, an image of Jesus, the three prisoners will be spared. But, if he does not apostatize, they will be killed.

The three prisoners have already rejected Christianity and ritually stepped on the *fumi-e*, but they’re not important, the interpreter says. The Japanese officials only hound such Christian lay people in order to get the priests themselves to turn their backs on their faith.

Silently, inside his head, Rodrigues shouts to Garrpe, “Apostatize! Apostatize!” But he says nothing out loud.

On the beach, Monica and the two others have been loaded into the boat, and the boat is moving into deeper water.

Garrpe is being forced to choose.

Suddenly, as Rodrigues watches, the priest runs into the surf and swims toward the boat, shouting, “Lord, hear our prayer!”

Garrpe’s head rises and falls in the waves, and each time it comes

above the water surface Rodrigues can hear, “Lord, hear our prayer!” Garrpe’s head looks “like a piece of black dust” on the waves.

Now, in the boat, one of the guards takes a lance and pushes the first of the Christian prisoners into the water, then the second, then Monica. They sink quickly under the waves.

Only Garrpe’s head remains above the surface of the sea.

And then that too is gone.

“At least Garrpe was clean,” the interpreter tells Rodrigues. “But you...you...you are the most weak-willed. You don’t deserve the name ‘father.’”



Questions for Reflection or Discussion

Why does Garrpe ask so many questions of others? Do you every find yourself doing the same thing? Why?

Garrpe calls Kichijiro a “weak-minded coward.” He calls Rodrigues an “idiot” when his friend goes to open the door to their hut. Do you ever use insults and name-calling to make a point? Is it effective? Give some examples.

Garrpe dives into the sea and swims to the boat holding the three Christians tied up in straw mats like “basket worms”? What do you think he hopes to accomplish? Does it work? Why or why not?

Garrpe shouts, “Lord, hear our prayer,” over and over and over as he swims. Do you think he, like Rodrigues, feels betrayed because he believes God has remained silent in the face of such persecution? Have you felt betrayed by God? Explain your answer.

How would you describe Garrpe’s faith? In what ways is it similar or different from your own?

A Personal and Group Guide to One of the Most Spiritually Challenging Novels of All Time

Martin Scorsese's new film, based on Shusaku Endo's celebrated novel *Silence*, raises a wide range of faith-related questions. And Patrick T. Reardon's *Faith Stripped to Its Essence* is the perfect guide for those of all faiths trying to delve into the movie and/or the book.

In this "discordant journey," Reardon provides erudite commentary as well as perceptive and provocative questions for individual reflection and small-group discussion. Chapters are devoted to each of the main characters and their own experience of faith. These characters are all believers in one way or another, but are far from unified in their approach to living that faith in the real world.

As Reardon explains in his Introduction: "There is a mystery at the heart of Shusaku Endo's 1966 novel *Silence*, and it is this: Father Sebastian Rodrigues, a seventeenth-century Jesuit priest from Portugal, steals into Japan during a time of terror-filled, bloody repressions of Christianity in which hundreds of believers in Jesus are routinely tortured and executed. He lives in hiding, providing the sacraments when and where he can to communities of Christians who, at great peril, have kept their faith alive in secret. As one of the few priests still in Japan, he is a symbol of the church, a beacon and a model for those who come to him for spiritual solace and support. Yet, in the end, he goes against all that he has stood for."

Praise for Shūsaku Endō's Novel *Silence*

"One of the finest novels of our time." — Graham Greene

"The whiskey priest of *The Power and the Glory* does not defect or lose his faith; he maintains a priestly ministry despite his own unworthiness, which partially qualifies him for serving other weak people. Endo explores a more interesting paradox; his priest does defect, not from weakness but from love, to spare Christian converts the persecution mounted against them."

— Gary Wills in *The New York Review of Books*

"One of the most depressing novels I have ever read. But I've read it three times." — Raymond A. Schroth, SJ, literary editor, *America*

"A remarkable work, a somber, delicate, and startlingly empathetic study." — John Updike in *The New Yorker*

"Questioning may lead to great loneliness, but if it co-exists with faith — true faith, abiding faith — it can end in the most joyful sense of communion. It's this painful, paradoxical passage — from certainty to doubt to loneliness to communion — that Endo understands so well, and renders so clearly, carefully, and beautifully in *Silence*." — Martin Scorsese

"A disturbing and memorable reading experience." — Donald Brophy in *One Hundred Great Catholic Books: From Early Centuries to the Present*

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