

# Silence (2016)

Rated R. Running time: 2 hours 41 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 6; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

*As a deer longs for flowing streams,  
so my soul longs for you, O God.*

*My soul thirsts for God,  
for the living God.  
When shall I come and behold  
the face of God?  
My tears have been my food  
day and night,  
while people say to me continually,  
"Where is your God?"*

...

*I say to God, my rock,  
'Why have you forgotten me?  
Why must I walk about mournfully  
because the enemy oppresses me?'*

*Psalm 42:1-3; 9*

*At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice,*

*'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?'*

*which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'*

*Mark 15:34*

*When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter,  
'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said  
to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to*

*him, 'Feed my lambs.'*

*John 21:15*



*Two Portuguese priests are sent to Japan to discover what has become of an earlier missionary, rumored to have renounced his faith under torture. (c) United Artists*

Rarely has there been such a film as this one, challenging us to think about faith and doubt, martyrdom and pride, the church and Western imperialism, and above all, suffering and the silence of God. Martin Scorsese and co-scriptwriter Jay Cocks have masterfully adapted the Japanese Catholic writer Shusako Endo's 1966 prize-winning novel for the screen. It has reportedly taken the director almost 30 years to get his version produced (there have been two others—Masahiro Shinoda's 1971 *Chinmoku* in Japan, and in Portugal João Mário Grilo's *The Eyes of Asia*). After experiencing (a far better word than "seeing") this one, I can gladly say it was worth the wait.

At the beginning, in the year 1637, we hear words of Father Cristóvão Ferreira (Liam Neeson) in a letter he has sent from Japan to his superior in Lisbon describing the way in which a group of Japanese Christians were tortured to death. Hands

bound to their bodies, the unfortunates, all of whom had refused to recant (the less familiar word "apostatize" will also be used throughout the film) their faith, are led to the volcanic springs where their captors sprinkle onto them boiling water, and then tie them to posts where they slowly die from their scalding wounds. We see the heads of two priests displayed on a wooden trestle by the side of one of the springs. The priest says that the two missionaries not only refused to renounce their faith by stepping one foot onto a fumie, a sacred plaque bearing the image of Mary or Jesus, but asked to be tortured "so they could demonstrate the power of their faith."

The above is from the last of Ferreira's letters describing his intense experience in Japan, read by Father Valignano (Ciarán Hinds) to two idealistic Jesuits, Father Sebastião Rodrigues (Andrew Garfield) and Father Francisco Garrpe (Adam Driver). When he tells them that there is a rumor that Ferreira apostatized and is now living in Japan with a wife and child, the two priests refuse to believe the report. It is beyond Fr. Rodrigues' comprehension that the man who had been his teacher and mentor could have done so. "Impossible," they both say. They gain permission from their reluctant superior to journey to Japan so that they can find Fr. Ferreira and prove to the world that he is still the great missionary he was reputed to be.

Thus, the film becomes a quest story, one that has reminded some of the quest by Martin Sheen's idealistic Capt. Willard for Marlon Brando's Col. Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*. Indeed, this film might remind viewers of numerous films, such as those made by the Japanese filmmaker whom both Scorsese and his friend George Lukas admire so much, Akira Kurosawa, thanks to the glorious cinematography of Rodrigo Prieto who captures so well the mists from which figures emerge so mysteriously, and the sun which at times lights up the sky, mountains, and seascapes. Then there also is *The Mission*, Roland Joffé's film

about Jesuit missionaries a century later in South America.

In the Chinese port of Macao our adventuresome priests are brought to the only known Japanese person in the city, and does he turn out to be a disappointment! Kichijiro (Yôsuke Kubozuka) is in a drunken stupor, dressed in rags, and lying in the bottom of a boat. He claims not to be a Christian, but is willing to put them in contact with some hidden Christians near Nagasaki. Dating back to 1549 when Francis Xavier had begun missionary work in Japan, there had once been a flourishing Catholic enclave there, said to number between 200 & 300K, much of this growth being due to the Jesuits' mixing of trade and religion. Then later in the century the rulers, sensing danger from the introduction of a foreign cult and the learning of the take-over of lands in the Americas by the Portuguese and Spanish, reversed their initial tolerance and banned Christianity under pain of death.

Rowed close to shore during the night, the three furtively make their way to shore where a party from the nearby village of Tomogi await them. The kakure kirishitan, "hidden Christians," are both thrilled and afraid as they welcome their three guests. Thrilled, or perhaps I should say "thirsty" like the deer to which the psalmist compares himself, to at last have priests who can hear their confessions and administer the sacraments. Afraid because word of them might bring their shogun's Inquisitor to their village, which could lead to interrogations, arrest, torture, and death. Rather than house the two priests in the village, they conduct them to an old shack up the mountainside. They give them a secret knock, telling them never to open the door if the knock is different. There is a tiny room under the floor for the two to hide in.

Thus, days are spent confined to the small one-room shack, and nights are spent in a busy round of hearing confessions, baptizing children, and celebrating Mass. The people have long lived without any visible sign of Christ, so they are excited

when Rodriguez gives one his small wooden cross and fashions others out of strands of straw. There are so many eager for a tangible sign that he even dismantles his rosary and hands out the beads. All but their guide Kichijiro eagerly receive one. Later the guide reveals to them that when arrested and told to step on the fumie, his parents had refused, but he did. They were burned alive as he looked on. He cannot consider himself a Christian any more.



A secret Mass held for the "hidden Christians," as those Japanese wanting to hold onto their faith are called. (c) United Artists

As the days pass by, the two priests grow restless over their confinement, and so come out to bask in the sunshine. Startled to see a couple of peasants looking their way, they retreat into the shack. The terrified Garrpe urges his companion not to go to the door when they hear knocking, but Rodrigues does. The visitors turn out to be Christians from another village who have heard about the priests' arrival. Rodriguez agrees to visit them, again finding the people eager to have a priest to whom they can confess and receive the sacraments.

Sadly, when he returns to Tomogi, he learns that the local Inquisitor has learned of their presence and taken away hostages, keeping them until the villagers renounce their faith. He returns and demands three more hostages, two who are volunteers and the third a very reluctant Kichijiro. He says

that when he comes back again, they will be required to publicly deny their faith. When Rodrigues emerges from hiding and is asked what they should do, he, not wanting to see them die, counsels them to submit. Upon the officials' return, Kichijiro quickly steps onto the holy image, and so do the villagers, but the Inquisitor Inoue (Issei Ogata) knows this is pretense, so he demands something more degrading. They must spit on a crucifix. Kichijiro does, but the other three refuse. They are bound to stakes at the sea shore, condemned to drown slowly when the tide comes in and the waves wash over their heads.

Rodrigues, hiding at the edge of the forest, is forced to become a mere observer now, his soul tossed about by doubts about the goodness or the power of God. His anguish is expressed by his question, "How can I explain His silence to these people?" He suffers alone because Fr. Garrpe has gone off to work in another village. Soon, Rodrigues too is captured, and comes up against Inoue and his interpreter (Tadanobu Asano). The priest, kept apart in his own cage in the compound, encourages his fellow prisoners. Between these scenes are confrontations with both the Inquisitor and the Interpreter. They say that Japanese people do not want Christianity because it is alien to their land. Rodrigues replies that plants can be transplanted and grow in different soils. But, the retort is that Japan is a swamp into which an alien plant like Christianity will not grow.

Some of the Japanese Christians are brought out before the priest's cage and told to step on the image. When they refuse, they are sent back to their cell, except for one. Without warning a guard takes out his sword and kills the man, his severed head rolling in front of the priest's cell. As his headless body is dragged through the compound, the priest again questions the silence of God. To his captors, Rodrigues is anything but the man of faith awaiting martyrdom. "He's arrogant, like all of them," the interpreter declares, while

Rodrigues is out of earshot, "but he'll fall." Taken to Nagasaki, Rodrigues watches helplessly another such brutal incident: a line of prisoners approaches, among whom is Fr. Garrpe. Wrapped in straw mats that pin their arms to their torsos, the Japanese are put aboard a boat. Rodriguez tries to shout to his friend that he should apostatize to save the hostages, but they are too far apart to be heard. When Father Garrpe sees what is being done to the hostages, he...

It becomes apparent that Inoue does not want to make his prisoner a martyr. He wants something far more devastating to any who might still cling to their faith in secret. He transfers Rodrigues to a Buddhist temple where he is told that the man who had triggered his quest is now a Buddhist scholar. The priest demands that he be allowed to see Father Ferreira. When at last he (and we) see Ferreira, there is a flashback to a time when a body is hung upside down, the head in a pit of feces. A small slit has been cut close to the victim's ear so that slowly blood drips into the pit. This will make sure that the brain will not hemorrhage and that the person will slowly die from lack of blood. Ferreira reveals that he is that person.



Fr. Rodrigues at last finds the priest he has been seeking, Fr. Ferreira, who has indeed become an apostate. (ft). (c) United Artist

The former teacher tells Rodrigues that he had been kept there for several days until at last he had broken, agreeing to convert to Buddhism. Shocked and disillusioned by reality, Rodrigues argues back and forth with his visitor, stating that he has seen many faithful Christians sticking with their faith until death. Ferreir replies that they were not really Christians, that they had mixed up "the Son of God" with the Oriental concept of "Sun of God." Bound to a horse, Rodrigues is paraded through the village so that the people can heckle and denounce him. Still later Kichijiro visits him, ashamed of his betrayal and asking for penance again. (This is the third or fourth time, I think!) Reluctantly the priest grants it.

In a further conversation with Ferreir, the latter tells him God had been silent to his pleas. When, late at night, Rodrigues is upset by a snoring-like noise and screams, Ferreir explains that the noise comes from five Christians being tortured as he had been, their bodies hanging upside down over pits. They have already apostatized, but their ordeal is being prolonged until Rodrigues does so also. Speaking again about the silence of God, Ferreir asserts that even Christ would apostatize for the villagers' sake.

The next day Rodrigues is still struggling over his decision. If he is to save the lives of the tortured wretches, he must renounce Christ. The Interrogator urges him to apostatize. He increases the pressure by referring to the captives being tortured, "Do you have the right to make them suffer? Apostatize for their sake!" At last the priest hears what he assumes is the voice of God saying that He had been with him, also suffering throughout the silence. The voice says that He came into the world to share men's pain by going to the cross. He tells Rodrigues to step onto the image. Rodrigues raises his foot above the fumie and brings it down. Then he collapses.

A year later the two former priests sit as they examine closely trade goods brought in by a Dutch trader Dieter



Albrecht, we hear the Dutchman's words as he has written them in his journal. The two men's task is to find and refuse entrance to anything that could be construed as Christian. In one instance they uncover an image of Christ concealed behind another. Even a porcelain dish that has a group of crosses that are purely decorative in the background is rejected. Living with a wife and children, Rodrigues has taken the Japanese name of Okada San'emon. Kichijiro is now a household servant. His fate I will leave for you to discover, as well as a fascinating ending that is open to differing interpretations.

You know a film is great if you continue to think about many of its parts after leaving the theater—and indeed which prevent you from going to sleep for a long while—and which also makes you think of so many other films. The silence of God, of course, is a theme found in many of Ingmar Bergman's somber films. Also, mentioned earlier are [Apocalypse Now](#) and [The Mission](#), both of which end unpleasantly. Still another is the 1955 film [The Prisoner](#) in which the great actor Alec Guinness portrays a Roman Catholic cardinal in an Iron Curtain country where he is put on trial for treason. Jack Hawkins is his nemesis, like the one in Scorsese's film, known only as The Interrogator, who also uses psychological means to break the cleric and get him to confess to the charges.

We wonder about the charge made that Fr. Rodrigues is as full of pride as much as faith. If that is the case, then his soul is in as much danger as that of Archbishop Thomas Becket in T.S. Elliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral*. In that play it has become obvious to him in his quarrel with the King of England that he will be killed. Three tempters come to him, and he rejects them. But the fourth is the most tempting of all, to become a martyr and thus gain glory, hence his reply that contains the lines, "The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason." Is this also Rodrigues' temptation? Also, would it be right for

Rodrigues to preserve his own faith and place in heaven at the expense of the suffering and death of the five tortured Christians? Is this not His cross, damning his soul by his apostatizing to save them?

How the story of Rodrigues fits into the traditional tales of martyrology is another question that Scorsese raises. The church has used stories of brave believers facing death unflinchingly throughout its history, such stories inspiring believers to face their own trials. Does the last shot at the end of the film place Rodrigues in this stout-hearted company? Think of the way that [The Robe](#) ends, with the newly converted Roman soldier Marcellus and his lover Diana standing before the Emperor Caligula who has just condemned to death. They march away from the Emperor's throne as their surroundings change to that of heaven while Caligula almost plaintively saying that they are going to a better place. A choir sings an inspiring chorus celebrating the faithful to death faith of two more martyrs.

Martin Scorsese's probing film might well be named *The Passion of Sebastião Rodrigues*. Do not miss it!

Note: The Hidden Christians of Japan have evoked lots of study and comment since they were discovered when Roman Catholic priests were allowed to return in the mid-19th century. There is an interesting 34-minute documentary on them, and you can see the ten-minute preview of it at <http://www.der.org/films/otaiya.html>.

*This review with a set of questions will be in the Feb. 2017 issue of VP.*