



What to expect from *Silence*

Frances Murphy

Martin Scorsese's 'passion project', *Silence*, based on the novel by Shūsako Endō, has been in the making for some twenty years. The story of Jesuit missionaries in Japan is rich with questions and Ignatian themes – Frances Murphy suggests what viewers should look out for when the film comes to UK cinemas on 1 January.

Shūsako Endō's novel, *Silence*, tells the story of two 17th century Portuguese Jesuit missionaries in Japan in search of the truth about what happened to their much-admired teacher, who is rumoured to have apostatised. As they come face to face with the reality of Japanese Christianity, the content and strength of the faith they encounter pose challenges to their own vocations and to their understanding of discipleship.



fascinated by the face of Christ just like a man fascinated by the face of his beloved.

It's easy to recognise in his words a man who has discovered the love that God has for him through Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises, and whose single desire is to reciprocate that love. Rodrigues has spent many an hour gazing in adoration at the face of the crucified Christ, seeking and finding consolation in the beauty of its features. And it is the face of Christ that ultimately animates the story of *Silence*.

The first half of the story is told via letters that one of the pair, Father Sebastian Rodrigues (played in the film by Andrew Garfield), writes to his Jesuit superiors. In the second half the narration reverts to the third person, but the reader is still privy to the intimate thoughts and struggles of 'the priest'.

It is a superb novel – one of the finest of our time, according to Graham Greene. It is provocative, meditative and full of suspense all at once, and, being a story about Jesuits, there is plenty more for the Ignatian-minded reader to absorb.

Rodrigues's thoughts are frequently steered by imaginative contemplation, as he tries to make sense of his own experiences by reflecting on the relationship between Christ and Judas, on the dynamics of Christ's meeting with Pilate, on Christ's every footstep on the journey to Golgotha, and more. The sense of his familiarity not only with the Scriptures but with Christ himself comes across powerfully, which makes his journey though the novel all the more agonising to follow.

The priest talks lovingly and often in his letters about the face of Christ:

What did the face of Christ look like? This point the Bible passes over in silence...I am always

The film will make potent watching in the wake of a year in which Pope Francis has encouraged us to reflect on and live out God's mercy. At one point the Japanese officials explicitly use the concept of mercy to torment and manipulate Rodrigues and his companion, Father Garrpe. But the idea of mercy is the implicit backbone of the story. The anguish that Rodrigues feels comes from his struggle to discern how to act mercifully, and his questioning of how his merciful God can be so silent in the face of the horrors that Rodrigues witnesses. Elijah found God in 'the sound of sheer silence', but God's 'unrelenting silence' induces terror in Rodrigues.

Silence is a story about Japan, about persecution, about the challenges of evangelisation, about Christian witness... and about so much more. The back cover of my copy of the novel advertised as far back as 1996 that '*Silence*... is to be filmed by Martin Scorsese'. This is a project that has been more than twenty years in the making, and so we can hope that the passion that exudes from the novel is also brought to our cinemas lovingly this winter.

Frances Murphy is Editor of Thinking Faith. This article was first published in the Winter 2016 issue of [Jesuits and Friends](#).