



A Reflection on Silence: The Movie

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February, 2017

After watching the recently released movie entitled Silence, I recalled a quote that has been attributed to God, which is “You will never be able to hear my words if you cannot hear my silence.” Silence is a movie about two Jesuit priests in search of their mentor, Fr. Ferreira, who committed apostasy after being tortured. The setting is Japan in the 1600’s and the practice of Christianity is forbidden. Upon their arrival in Japan, the two priests begin a journey that leads them down a road similar to the one their mentor travelled after his arrival.

The two priests witness one villager after another killed after given the chance to deny their Christian faith publically in front of government officials and fellow Christians. One of the priests, Fr. Garupe, dies half way through the movie trying to recuse Christian villagers tossed from a boat into the sea with their arms tied to their bodies. The other priest, Fr. Rodrigues, dies at the very end of the movie after living many years in Japan.

When Fr. Rodrigues first arrived in Japan, he also experienced lots of anguish and agony as public servants tortured and killed Christian villagers because of his refusal to commit apostasy. While struggling spiritually over the death of others because of his refusal to commit apostasy, he would cry out that all he heard was silence.

-Spoiler Alert-

After he is arrested, he sees more villagers being tortured and some killed through the bars of his cell. Again, he cries out in the midst of spiritual angst that all he can hear is silence. One night he hears the cries of five Christian villagers hung upside down a short distance from his cell. Fr. Ferreira, who was visiting him at the time, told him that he could save the five if he committed apostasy, which involved stepping on an image of the crucified Christ, carved out of stone, like the one below.



While anguishing over this decision, the prolonged silence is broken when he hears the voice of Christ giving him permission to step on the image, and he does. The tortured prisoners are freed, and so is he.

The question that I have been asking myself since I saw the movie revolves around the divinely attributed quote—“You will never be able to hear my words if you cannot hear my silence.” Did Fr. Rodrigues finally hear the words of Christ after hearing Christ’s silence, especially words so seemingly contradictory?

Thomas Merton in his book entitled *Contemplative Prayer* provided some insight into this dynamic. He noted that we often expect silence to be a medium that results in hearing God speak to us. In other words, while we are silent we expect God to break the silence soon with words. However, Merton believed that prolonged silence is the message at first and not the medium. Like other mystics, he also acknowledged that prolonged periods of silence as a message can end with hearing words from God.

Over the years, I have learned to accept lengthy periods of silence as the message concerning homelessness, a social wrong that I have been praying about and trying to solve with many others. I have learned to accept lengthy periods of divine silence while contributing to solutions to solve homelessness. My contributions have involved analyzing local homelessness data to help inform ways to help use best practices to end homelessness in local communities. I have also helped write many federal grants to obtain large amounts of funding in order to help implement the best practices. I have also helped design projects and programs to put the best practices into

action, and I have in turn helped evaluate these projects and programs to learn about, and promote, positive results.

I continue to carry out my contributions because I believe that God's lengthy periods of silence are broken when I carry out my contributions. I believe the inner voice inside of me encouraging and motivating me to carry out such contributions is the still small voice of God (1 Kings 19.12) breaking those periods of divine silence. I have grown confident that hearing God's still small voice is the result of embracing God's silence initially as the message. Hearing God's silence, particularly within the context of social dilemmas, enables one to hear ultimately God's words.

For me, believing that the silence that Fr. Rodrigues experienced while feeling emotional and spiritual upheaval over his refusal to commit apostasy at the expense of the villagers, is the message and not the medium is one thing. However, believing that the words of Christ that broke the silence gave him permission to commit apostasy is another thing.

I have been tempted to demystify my growing reflections over the emotional and spiritual upheaval of Fr. Rodrigues because he committed an act of apostasy according to the culture of the time. However, I recalled the words of Christ to Peter right before his crucifixion

Truly, I tell you, this very night,
before the rooster crows,
you will deny me three times."
(Matthew 26.34)

Prior to Peter's denials, he professed Christ, as noted in the Gospel of Matthew:

"Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."
Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!
For this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by My Father in heaven.
And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church,
and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.
I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.
Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven,
and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."
(Matthew 16. 16 -19)

Did Peter know that Christ loved him so much that he knew that even if he denied Christ three times, Christ would still love him? Did Fr. Rodrigues know that Christ loved him so much that he knew that even if he denied Christ, Christ would still love him?

Did Peter know that even if he denied Christ three times, he knew that he still loved Christ? Did Fr. Rodrigues know that even if he denied Christ, he still loved Christ?

The movie ends years after Fr. Rodrigues committed apostasy. The final scene shows his dead body in a large wooden casket and his hand holding the small cross that he accepted from one of the villagers when he first arrived in Japan. I can imagine this act being proof that Fr. Rodrigues loved Christ deeply after his act of apostasy.

Thus, my reflections have served as a potent reminder—the love of Christ is very powerful and so is his silence.

Therefore, in the midst of our struggles with social and personal dilemmas, we may hear that still small voice enhance that divinely attributed quote as follows:

“You will never be able to hear my words,
or experience the depths of my love and your love for me,
if you cannot first hear my silence.”