

Spring - a time of Hope and New Life

Bradly Rozairo; Delegation Superior

During my first few years in Japan, I remember many used to ask me as to what I like most in this country, and my answer would be the four seasons. I think one of the most beautiful transitions is from winter to spring. After a long cold winter when you experience some nice and warm weather it makes you feel that it's time to start new again.

Here in Kobe we have got an old lady in her 100s! As winter approaches she pretends to be a dead person, but as spring dawns she is full of life. She is none other than an old, but a beautiful Cherry Blossom tree. She somehow manages to survive the period of transition from winter to spring in order to give hope and life to many including myself.

I think the transition in nature should help us understand the spiritual journey of Lent. There are times we feel that the winter of life is too long and we cannot bear life's hardships and pains. This often leads to frustration and we easily tend to give up rather than persevere in our struggle. Each one of us would want the benefits of life without having to pay the price for them, but the life of Jesus suggests that the road to victory is the cross. In the words of Fulton J. Sheen, • Unless there is a Good Friday in your life, there can be no Easter Sunday. •

As we continue our Lenten journey, let us be reminded of the fact that we cannot experience the true joy of Easter without going through the Good Friday experience in life. Our struggles and hardships have meaning, and if we can patiently go through them, then I think we will be able to experience the hope of resurrection that brings new life.



A cherry tree blooms over piles of debris after the Great Tsunami in Tohoku, March 2011



WELCOME, Father Claudio!

Here, to facilitate our Spring Meeting this year is Fr. Claudio BERTUCCIO, OMI of the Thailand-Laos Delegation. (He served as the Superior of the Delegation in the past.) Fr. Claudio was the Chapter Commissioner of the 36th General Chapter, the Chapter that celebrated the 200th anniversary of the congregation. Having served as the Chapter Commissioner, he is the most knowledgeable person to talk about the spirit of the 36th General Chapter that took its theme from the motto that gave birth to the congregation: *“Evangelizare pauperibus misit me ... Pauperibus evangelizantur.”*



Afterthoughts on SILENCE (Chinmoku) The Historical Novel That Was Made Into A Movie

Wency Laguidao, OMI

When our Superior General, Fr. Louie Lougen visited Japan in March 2015 (after visiting Korea), one of the first things he asked was how he could get an English copy of Endo Shusaku's novel: *SILENCE*. English books are hard to find in Japan but I was lucky to have found it at a bookstore in Osaka tucked among the classics. I remember having read the book when I first arrived in Japan but really did not see the relevance of the story until I experienced working with many Nagasaki Catholics when I was



parish priest of Hikarigaoka Church in Fukuoka. Many of the parishioners proudly claimed that they are descendants of the hidden Christians (or “kakure kirishitan” as they were called in those days.) But they would just laugh at themselves as “very far removed” from the faith shown by their forefathers. Nagasaki has the largest concentration of Catholics even now. I have met Nagasaki Christians who narrated how they were bullied by their peers and how people would jeer and pelt stones at them on their way to school, calling them names, all because they were Christians. Other Nagasaki Catholics would rather forget their sad experiences growing up as Christians. (N.B. Christians and Catholics are used interchangeably here) Many discussions by experts have been heard and read after the first showing of the film. I offer my two-cent take on the topic.

The “SILENCE” of God

Those of us who are old enough to remember the historic moon landing of the Apollo 11 mission in 1969, might recall that the last astronaut to disembark from the spacecraft was Gene Cernan (he died recently). In one of his interviews after they returned to earth, he related how it felt when the engine of their lunar module was turned off. “The SILENCE was just indescribable!” he said. It was something that they have not experienced on earth: the SILENCE of being separated from the rest of humanity on a different celestial body almost 400,000 kms away.

Earthlings like the rest of us will never experience the silence on the lunar surface but we, too, sing of a different experience of silence, here on planet earth, as in the lyrics of an old song: “People talking without speaking. People hearing without listening.... Silence like a cancer grows...” There is the silence that quietly kills like cancer, as the song goes. There is the silence of indifference and apathy. There is the silence of hatred. There is the silence in the sufferings of immigrants, victims of human trafficking, those discriminated on the basis of religion, children orphaned by wars, etc.

But silence is also an ambivalent word like a two-edged sword that can cut both ways. It is in silence that we suffer from the seeming absence of God amidst human suffering (Holocaust, Tohoku

Earthquake and Tsunami, Aleppo, etc.) but it is also when we retreat from the hustle and bustle of the world to the silence of our hearts that we can encounter God.

The Author of the Novel



Endo Shusaku

Endo Shusaku (1923-1996) is not one whom we can call a “mainstream” Japanese author. He is ranked among the big names but he dealt with religious topics such as his own struggles with his faith which made him different from the rest. His struggles in life started when his parents separated. Together with his mother, he was baptized when he was 11 at Shukugawa Church, right next to Itami Church run by the Oblates in the Archdiocese of Osaka. He completed his monumental work *SILENCE* (Chinmoku) in 1966. Among the many questions evoked by the novel is a perennial question that has dogged many spiritual writers in the past: How can God be silent amidst the sufferings of the people who believe in Him?

The Director/Producer of the Movie

Martin Scorsese directed the film. A catholic who grew up in Manhattan, NY, he entered the high school seminary and dreamed of being a missionary in a foreign land. An Oscar-winning director, it took Scorsese 28 years to fulfill his promise of transforming Endo Shusaku’s novel into screen form after he met another famous Japanese director, Kurozawa Akira. No records show however that Endo Shusaku and Martin Scorsese had ever met but the two are Catholics who have, one way or the other, struggled with their faith or “wrestled with God” as we see in the many unanswered questions that the story has left behind.



Martin Scorsese - center - at the set of the movie

Hard Questions Asked

The film has revived the discussions on the hard questions posed by the novel and some of those questions are:

- Why is God silent amidst human suffering?

- Can apostasy be justified to save the lives of others?

- Is Christianity really a western religion that fails to adapt to the local culture and will never take root among the Japanese like plants on a swamp that can easily be uprooted?

Indeed, there are no easy answers and any attempt to give answers and as far as human suffering is concerned, we would only sound like Job who ranted continuously, blaming God for all his sufferings. In the end, it was God’s turn to ask Job: “Who is this obscuring my designs? Brace yourself for now it is my turn to ask questions... Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations?” The Book of Job ends with God restoring everything that Job lost. But, sad to say, in real life, a silver-lining to our sufferings cannot be guaranteed. We only have to suffer in silence oftentimes.



Mokichi and Padre Rodriguez in a huddle

The Message and Characters of the Story

Two young Jesuits (Padre Rodriguez and Padre Garupe) set off from Portugal to Rome to Goa to Macao with a mission to find their mentor, Padre Ferreira whom they heard have apostatized. In Macao, they met Kichijiro, a Japanese vagrant who would be the one to guide them to Japan. When they arrived in Japan, Kichijiro informs the hidden Christians (kirishitan) that two padres had arrived. The two Jesuits

would find out later that Kichijiro himself is a Christian, pictured as a wishy-washy figure who always run for confession every time he sinned. He also was reminiscent of Judas who sold the Lord for 30 pieces of silver. Padre Ferreira took the pivotal role especially in the life of the young priest Rodriguez who apostatized to save more Christians from being dying. A cock crows in the background after he did, reminding us of Peter's denials despite affirming 3 times that he loved Jesus and was ready to die for him. Then there was Mokichi and the brave people like him who did not compromise their faith even if meant dying. The inquisitor in Inoue and the people around him, who on a positive tone gave the opportunity for the believers to affirm their faith in a very difficult way: through martyrdom.

Inoue torments Rodriguez to apostatize and in doing so spare the lives of others. He tells the young priest that Christianity will never thrive in Japan because Japan it is like a swamp where anything planted will not take root. Besides, Inoue says that Christianity is a foreign religion not suited for the Japanese. Rodriguez poignantly answers: "Christianity preaches the Truth and the Truth is the same wherever we are."

The role of Kichijiro is worth noting. A weak, disdainful character, he reminds us of Judas. But he had some positive traits, too. He was the one who guided the young Jesuits from Macao to Nagasaki and created an opportunity for the hidden Christians to be able to meet the young padres. He also risked his life by doing the things that he did. He led a "sinful" life but in the end, he too became a martyr.

The torture, drowning and crucifixion scenes in the movie were most gruesome to watch. The pain of the Christians who were forced to watch the martyrdom of one or many of them only exacerbated the tortuous way to martyrdom. Martyrdom was shared not only by those who died for their faith but also by the community that watched while members were being tortured to death.

Apostasy? or Sacrilege or Desecration

There was a documentary film on the last days of World War II when the American forces saturated Japan in an effort to flush out remaining soldiers who refused to surrender. One scene had the camera on the tatami floors of homes being "desecrated" by U.S. soldiers who entered with their muddy combat boots. It was repugnant to watch. The Japanese consider their homes like a sacred place that they do not enter with their shoes on, much more tread on tatami floor with muddy boots. The scene was reminiscent of the *fumie*, the act of stepping on a religious object which is a symbol of Faith, a psychological way of torture used in the story. Indeed, there is subtle cultural issue here that might not be



The act of *Fumie*

visible to the western eyes. Perhaps Endo Shusaku preferred not to elucidate on why the seemingly "simple act" of stepping on a religious object was such a bigger issue for a Japanese than it would have to a westerner or a non-Japanese. Endo Shusaku, knowingly or unknowingly, has left the readers of his novel to grapple with moral questions like, "What actions constitute apostasy?" Is apostasy allowed in certain situations like allowing abortion to save the life of the mother?" If theology is "faith seeking understanding," Endo Shusaku seemed to have wanted his readers to continue to "theologize" in a way that is unique and perhaps in the "eastern way" where silence is the only answer to many of life's questions, like trying to listen to the sound of "one-hand clapping."

Kichijiro hinted at an easier way out of a difficult situation without having to die for ones beliefs. Wasn't he telling us that it was okay to apostatize since we can always avail of compesar and be absolved by the padres, since that's what they have come here for!

It is often said that the Church stands on the blood of its martyrs for its foundation. The same thing can be said of the Church of Japan. We cannot however negate the fact that the Church at any given time, is composed of saints and well as sinners. It is a human Church. The Church of Japan stands on the foundation built by the blood of martyrs but at the same time, people like Kichijiro and the Jesuits who apostatized, weak and sinful in the eyes of men but must have been justified for their faith.

An Overview of Beginnings of the Japanese Church

Christianity is perceived not only as foreign but also as a religion that subverts the status quo and is therefore dangerous. It is a religion that meddles in the affairs of society. It instills rebellion in the minds



Kichijiro. Sinner, or Saint?

of people and therefore must be cut off from its roots. This was mindset of the bakufu (shogunate) that wanted Christianity eradicated.

Among the earliest Christian missionaries to set foot on Japanese soil was Francis Xavier (circa 1549). He was a Basque who arrived with other Jesuits from Portugal. Other missionaries from Spain (Franciscans, Dominicans, etc.) arrived later by way of Manila.

Japan was in turmoil. The emperor was powerless and there was power struggle among the daimyos. It was around this time when Oda Nobunaga took control and unified Japan. Christianity was generally allowed to flourish with many daimyos converting to Christianity along with commoners. It is said that there was a time when there were about 130,000 converts to Christianity. It was also around this time also when Justo Takayama Ukon (the catholic Daimyo recently beatified) was baptized.

Persecution started under the rule of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (circa 1580) and continued under Tokugawa Ieyasu (circa 1598). It was during the rule of Toyotomi Hideyoshi that 26 Japanese Christians and foreign missionaries were martyred in Nagasaki.

Worth noting is the very sluggish growth in the Christian population since the time of Francis Xavier. As of 2012 census, the Catholic population in Japan stands at around 529,000 (excluding a large number of foreigners), almost 500 years since the time of Francis Xavier.

Postscript to SILENCE

Why is it that Christianity failed to make inroads in the Japanese society since the initial successes of the earliest missionaries that included Francis Xavier? Were the early rulers right when they said that Christianity will never take root in Japan, comparing it to plants on a swampy ground?

In recent history, close to 500 years after Francis Xavier, the catholic population of Japan has increased leaps and bounds with the arrival of immigrants mainly from catholic countries like the Philippines and Latin American countries like Peru, Brazil, etc. By coincidence, these countries were colonized by either Spain or Portugal offering the least resistance. Unlike Japan, which resisted foreign rule and the religion that it brought, the countries mentioned above were colonized against their will in most cases. The colonizers brought along with them Christianity which the people had to embrace together with the government of the conquering power. The Cross and the Crown were forced upon the local population on many instances.

However, Padre Rodriguez in the movie said that "TRUTH is the same at any given time and culture." It is the same Christian Truth that Francis Xavier and companions propagated in Japan and other places in Asia. Again by coincidence, it is the same Christian Truth that the recent immigrants to Japan have brought with them to the Japanese shores, almost 500 years since Francis Xavier set foot on this land.

Indeed, TRUTH cannot be SILENCED!



Mokichi defies his torturers to the end by singing *Tantum Ergo* while drowning.

LINKS to Discussions on the Movie SILENCE:

Japanese-American Sees Silence as Antidote to Superficiality:

<https://cruxnow.com/interviews/2017/02/04/japanese-american-artist-sees-silence-antidote-superficiality/>

Bishop Robert Barron (a good friend of many Oblates and calls the late Cardinal George his "mentor") gives us what he thinks of the movie:

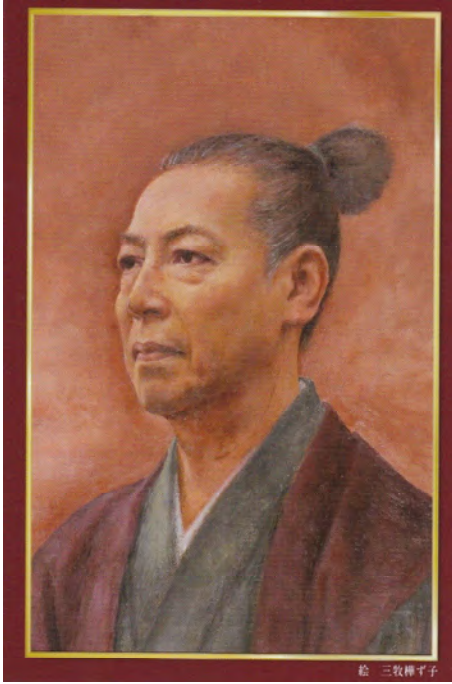
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Th7Tiz1cEk>

Fr. James Martin, SJ, consultant to the production of the Movie Silence:

<http://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2017/01/18/fr-james-martin-answers-5-common-questions-about-silence>

Beatification of JUSTO TAKAYAMA UKON

Wency Laguidao, OMI



Blessed Justo Takayama Ukon
(1552 - 1615)

Pope Francis approved his beatification on January 21, 2016 and he was finally beatified on February 7, 2017 during the beatification rites led by Cardinal Angelo Amato, legate of the Holy Father. The ceremony was held at the Osaka Castle Hall attended by close to 10,000 people, composed of Catholics from all over the country, local priests, religious and bishops and church dignitaries from Vietnam, Cambodia, Luxemburg and South Korea.

His LIFE

Born Hikogoro Shigetomo in 1552, he belonged to the privileged class, his father being a daimyo (feudal lord). They were vassals of the shogun, the military ruler who wielded power while the emperor remained a nominal head. His father converted to Catholicism in 1564 when Ukon was 11 during the rule of Oda Nobunaga. He was baptized with his father that year and received the name "Justo."

When Tokunaga Ieyasu banned Christianity all together, Christians were either forced to recant their faith or face persecution. Ukon chose to abandon his privileged status in favor of keeping his faith but he had to flee to Manila along with 300 other Christians. They were warmly welcomed in Manila by the ruling Spanish government and by the Jesuits who protected them. Justo, however, died of illness in 1615, a year after their arrival in Manila.

People in Manila saw the saintly qualities in his life that they started the cause for his sainthood as early as 1640. But due to the difficulty in gathering the necessary materials from Japan, which banned all activities related to Christianity, the cause for sainthood did not flourish and was abandoned. It was only in 1994 when the cause for his sainthood was taken up again, leading to his elevation as Servant of God and later, Blessed.



Part of the crowd during the Beatification



Cardinal Amato reading the Decree of Beatification

New administration in Colombo



From left: Fr.Srian Ranasinghe, Fr.Andrias Fernando, Fr. Irwin Morais (Provincial) , Fr.Dilan Perera, Fr.Romesh Lowe, Fr.Christy Silva



AORC Meeting In Manila

The Asia-Oceania Regional Conference held their annual meeting at the OMI Retreat House in Quezon City (Philippines) last March 18 to 24. It was a joint meeting of the AORC headed by the new President, Fr. Peter DALY (originally from Australia and had been working in Indonesia) and the General Financial Committee headed by Fr. Marc Dessurealt. The meeting was attended by the Provincials and Superiors and also by the Treasurers in the region. Brad ROZAIRO (Japan), Maurizio GIORGIANNI (Korea) and Ken FURUKAWA (Treasurer On-training Japan) represented the Japan-Korea Delegation.



Opening Ceremony



AORC Provincials, Superiors and Treasurers with Fr. Marc Dessurealt (Rome)



Group Meeting



Eucharistic Celebration