

WORD ON FIRE

CLASSICS

Silence

SHŪSAKU ENDŌ

FOREWORD *by* BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

Published by Word on Fire, Elk Grove Village, IL 60007
© 2026 by Word on Fire Catholic Ministries
Printed in the United States of America
All rights reserved

Cover design, typesetting, and interior art direction by Anna Manhart
and Rozann Lee

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations,
and events portrayed in this novel are either
products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

This edition published by arrangement with Pushkin Press.
Used with permission.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner
whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief
quotations in critical articles or reviews. For more information,
contact Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, PO Box 97330,
Washington, DC 20090-7330 or email contact@wordonfire.org.

ISBN: 978-1-68578-250-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2026936011

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SHŪSAKU ENDŌ (1923–1996) was born in Tokyo and raised by his mother and an aunt in Kobe, where he converted to Roman Catholicism at the age of eleven. At Tokyo's Keio University, he majored in French literature, graduating with a BA in 1949, before furthering his studies in French Catholic literature at the University of Lyon in France between 1950 and 1953. Before his death in 1996, Endō was the recipient of a number of outstanding Japanese literary awards—the Akutagawa Prize, Mainichi Cultural Prize, Shincho Prize, and Tanizaki Prize—and was widely considered the greatest Japanese novelist of his time.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

WILLIAM JOHNSTON (1925–2010) was an Irish translator and Jesuit missionary. An authority on fourteenth-century spirituality, he translated several works from the contemplative traditions of both East and West, as well as work by Shūsaku Endō.

Contents

FOREWORD BY Bishop Robert Barron	vii
TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE	xi

SILENCE

PROLOGUE	3
CHAPTER 1	13
CHAPTER 2	24
CHAPTER 3	32
CHAPTER 4	49
CHAPTER 5	85
CHAPTER 6	109
CHAPTER 7	131
CHAPTER 8	167
CHAPTER 9	186
CHAPTER 10	192
APPENDIX	206

Foreword

Bishop Robert Barron

Shūsaku Endō's *Silence*, a novel of great thematic complexity, is set in mid-seventeenth-century Japan, where a fierce persecution of the Catholic faith is underway. To this dangerous country come two young Jesuit priests, Father Rodrigues and Father Garrpe—spiritual descendants of Saint Francis Xavier. They have been sent to find Father Ferreira, their mentor and seminary professor, who, rumor has it, had apostatized under torture and actually gone over to the other side. Immediately upon arriving onshore, they are met by a small group of Japanese Christians who had been maintaining their faith underground for many years. Due to the extreme danger, the young priests are forced into hiding during the day, but they are able to engage in clandestine ministry at night: baptizing, catechizing, confessing, celebrating the Mass. In rather short order, however, the authorities get wind of their presence, and suspected Christians are rounded up and tortured in the hopes of luring the priests out into the open. The single most memorable scene in Martin Scorsese's gripping adaptation of the novel, at least for me, was the seaside crucifixion of four of these courageous lay believers. Tied to crosses by the shore, they are, in the course of several days, buffeted by the incoming tide until they drown. Afterward, their bodies are burned to ashes, appearing for all the world like holocausts offered to the Lord.

In time, the priests are captured and subjected to a unique and terrible form of psychological torture. Eventually, Father Rodrigues is brought to Father Ferreira, the mentor whom he had been seeking since his arrival in Japan. All the rumors are true: This former master of the Christian life, this Jesuit hero,

has renounced his faith, taken a Japanese wife, and is living as a sort of philosopher under the protection of the state. Using a variety of arguments, the disgraced priest tries to convince his former student to give up the quest to evangelize Japan, which he characterizes as a “swamp” where the seed of Christianity can never take root. Without giving too much of the plot away, Father Rodrigues’s dedication to the faith is increasingly put to the test, and at the height of his anguish, he makes a definitive decision—one that Endō punctuates with a suggestive reference to Christ’s Passion.

What in the world do we make of this strange and disturbing story? Like any great novel, *Silence* obviously resists a univocal or one-sided interpretation. It’s often been remarked, especially by religious people, how this story beautifully brings forward the complex, layered, ambiguous nature of faith. Fully acknowledging the profound psychological and spiritual truth of that claim, I wonder whether I might add a somewhat dissenting voice to the conversation. I would like to propose a comparison, altogether warranted by the instincts of a one-time soldier named Ignatius of Loyola, who founded the Jesuit order to which all the *Silence* missionaries belonged. Suppose a small team of highly trained American special ops was smuggled behind enemy lines for a dangerous mission. Suppose furthermore that they were aided by loyal civilians on the ground, who were eventually captured and proved willing to die rather than betray the mission. Suppose finally that the troops themselves were eventually detained and, under torture, renounced their loyalty to the United States, joined their opponents, and lived comfortable lives under the aegis of their former enemies. Would anyone be eager to celebrate the layered complexity and rich ambiguity of their patriotism? Wouldn’t we see them rather straightforwardly as cowards and traitors?

My worry is that all of the stress on complexity and multivalence and ambiguity is in service of the cultural elite today, which is not that different from the Japanese cultural elite of this story.

What I mean is that the secular establishment always prefers Christians who are vacillating, unsure, divided, and altogether eager to privatize their religion. And it is all too willing to dismiss passionately religious people as dangerous, violent, and—let's face it—not that bright. Revisit Ferreira's conversation with Rodrigues about the supposedly simplistic Christianity of the Japanese laity if you doubt me on this score. I wonder whether Shūsaku Endō was actually inviting us to look *away* from the priests and toward that wonderful group of courageous, pious, dedicated, long-suffering laypeople who kept the Christian faith alive under the most inhospitable conditions imaginable, and who, at the decisive moment, witnessed to Christ with their lives. Whereas the specially trained Ferreira became a paid lackey of a tyrannical government—an avatar of the utterly privatized, hidden, and harmless Christianity preferred by the regnant culture—those simple folk remained a thorn in the side of tyrants.

Translator's Preface

Shūsaku Endō has been called the Japanese Graham Greene. If this means that he is a Catholic novelist, that his books are problematic and controversial, that his writing is deeply psychological, that he depicts the anguish of faith and the mercy of God—then it is certainly true. For Mr. Endō has now come to the forefront of the Japanese literary world writing about problems which at one time seemed remote from this country: problems of faith and God, of sin and betrayal, of martyrdom and apostasy.

Yet the central problem which has preoccupied Mr. Endō even from his early days is the conflict between East and West, especially in its relationship to Christianity. Assuredly this is no new problem but one which he has inherited from a long line of Japanese writers and intellectuals from the time of Meiji; but Mr. Endō is the first Catholic to put it forward with such force and to draw the clear-cut conclusion that Christianity must adapt itself radically if it is to take root in the “swamp” of Japan. His most recent novel, *Silence*, deals with the troubled period of Japanese history known as “the Christian century”—about which a word of introduction may not be out of place.

I

Christianity was brought to Japan by the Basque Francis Xavier, who stepped ashore at Kagoshima in the year 1549 with two Jesuit companions and a Japanese interpreter. Within a few months of his arrival, Xavier had fallen in love with the Japanese whom he called “the joy of his heart.” “The people whom we have met so far,” he wrote enthusiastically to his companions in Goa, “are the best who have as yet been discovered, and it seems to me that we shall never find . . . another race to equal the Japanese.” In spite of linguistic difficulties (“We are like statues among them,”

he lamented) he brought some hundreds to the Christian faith before departing for China, the conversion of which seemed to him a necessary prelude to that of Japan. Yet Xavier never lost his love of the Japanese; and, in an age that tended to relegate to some kind of inferno everyone outside Christendom, it is refreshing to find him extolling the Japanese for virtues which Christian Europeans did not possess.

The real architect of the Japanese mission, however, was not Xavier but the Italian, Alessandro Valignano, who united Xavier's enthusiasm to a remarkable foresight and tenacity of purpose. By the time of his first visit to Japan in 1579 there was already a flourishing community of some 150,000 Christians, whose sterling qualities and deep faith inspired in Valignano the vision of a totally Christian island in the north of Asia. Obviously, however, such an island must quickly be purged of all excessive foreign barbarian influence; and Valignano, anxious to entrust the infant Church to a local clergy with all possible speed, set about the founding of seminaries, colleges, and a novitiate—promptly despatching to Macao Francisco Cabral, who strongly opposed the plan of an indigenous Japanese church. Soon things began to look up: daimyos in Kyushu embraced the Christian faith, bringing with them a great part of their subjects; and a thriving Japanese clergy took shape. Clearly Valignano had been building no castles in the air: his dream was that of a sober realist.

It should be noted that the missionary effort was initiated in the Sengoku Period when Japan, torn by strife among the warring daimyos, had no strong central government. The distressful situation of the country, however, was not without advantages for the missionaries who, when persecuted in one fief, could quickly shake the dust off their feet and betake themselves elsewhere. But unification was close at hand; and Japan was soon to be welded into that solid monolith which was eventually to break out over Asia in 1940. The architects of unity (Nobunaga, Hideyoshi and Ieyasu) were all on intimate terms with the Portuguese Jesuits,

motivated partly by desire for trade with the black ships from Macao, partly (in the case of Nobunaga and Hideyoshi) by a deep dislike of Buddhism, and partly by the fascination of these cultured foreigners with whom they could converse without fear of betrayal and loss of prestige. Be that as it may, from 1570 until 1614 the missionaries held such a privileged position at the court of the Bakufu that their letters and reports are now the chief source of information for a period of history about which Japanese sources say little. All in all, the optimism of Valignano seemed to have ample justification.

Yet Japan can be a land of schizophrenic change; and just what prompted the xenophobic outburst of Hideyoshi has never been adequately explained. For quite suddenly, on July 24, 1587, while in his cups, he flew into a violent rage and ordered the missionaries to leave the country. "I am resolved," ran his message, "that the padres should not stay on Japanese soil. I therefore order that having settled their affairs within twenty days, they must return to their own country."¹ His anger, however, quickly subsided; most of the missionaries did not leave the country; and the expulsion decree became a dead letter. So much so that C.R. Boxer can observe that within four short years there was "a community of more than 200,000 converts increasing daily, and Hideyoshi defying his own prohibition by strolling through the gilded halls of Jurakudai Palace wearing a rosary and Portuguese dress."²

Nevertheless the writing was on the wall; and ten years after the first outburst, Hideyoshi's anger overflowed again. This time it was occasioned by the pilot of a stranded Spanish ship who, in an effort to impress the Japanese, boasted that the greatness of the Spanish Empire was partly due to the missionaries who always prepared the way for the armed forces of the Spanish king.

1. See C.R. Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1951), 148.

2. Boxer, 153.

When this news was brought to Hideyoshi he again boiled over and ordered the immediate execution of a group of Christian missionaries. And so twenty-six, Japanese and European, were crucified on a cold winter's morning in February 1597. Today, not far from Nagasaki station, there stands a monument to commemorate the spot where they died.

Yet missionary work somehow continued with the Jesuits apprehensive but still in favor at the royal court; and it was only under Hideyoshi's successor, Ieyasu, the first of the Tokugawas, that the death sentence of the mission became irrevocable. From the beginning, Ieyasu was none too friendly toward Christianity, though he tolerated the missionaries for the sake of the silk trade with Macao. But here things were changing: for the English and the Dutch had arrived. Nor was it long before the role of interpreter and confidant was transferred from the Portuguese Jesuits to the English Will Adams—who lost no time in assuring the Shogun that many European monarchs distrusted these meddling priests and expelled them from their kingdoms. Ieyasu evinced the greatest interest in the religious conflict that was rending Europe, questioning the English and the Dutch about it again and again. At the same time his apprehension grew as he observed the unquestioning obedience of his Christian subjects to their foreign guides.

And so finally in 1614 the edict of expulsion was promulgated declaring that “the Kirishitan band have come to Japan . . . longing to disseminate an evil law, to overthrow true doctrine, so that they may change the government of the country, and obtain possession of the land. This is the germ of a great disaster, and must be crushed.”³ This was the death blow. It came at a time when there were about 300,000 Christians in Japan (whose total population was about twenty million) in addition to colleges, seminaries, hospitals, and a growing local clergy. “It would be

3. Boxer, 318.

difficult," writes Boxer, "if not impossible, to find another highly civilized pagan country where Christianity had made such a mark, not merely in numbers but in influence."⁴

Even now, however, a desperate underground missionary effort was kept alive until, under Ieyasu's successors, the hunt for Christians and priests became so systematically ruthless as to wipe out every visible vestige of Christianity. Especially savage was the third Tokugawa, the neurotic Iemitsu—"neither the infamous brutality of the methods which he used to exterminate the Christians, nor the heroic constancy of the sufferers has ever been surpassed in the long and painful history of martyrdom."⁵

At first the most common form of execution was burning; and the Englishman, Richard Cocks, describes how he saw "fifty-five persons of all ages and both sexes burnt alive on the dry bed of the Kamo River in Kyoto (October 1619) and among them little children of five or six years old in their mothers' arms, crying out, 'Jesus receive their souls!'"⁶ Indeed, the executions began to be something of a religious spectacle, one of which Boxer describes as follows:

This ordeal was witnessed by 150,000 people, according to some writers, or 30,000 according to other and in all probability more reliable chroniclers. When the faggots were kindled, the martyrs said *sayonara* (farewell) to the onlookers who then began to intone the *Magnificat*, followed by the psalms *Laudate pueri Dominum* and *Laudate Dominum omnes gentes*, while the Japanese judges sat on one side "in affected majesty and gravity, as in their favorite posture." Since it had rained heavily the night before, the faggots were wet and the wood burnt slowly; but as long as the martyrdom

4. Boxer, 321.

5. Boxer, 337.

6. Boxer, 349.