

# Finding God in *Silence*

**E**very Catholic beseeches God for answers to life's most complex questions. We ask for guidance when making difficult decisions, and we pray for outcomes we cannot achieve without help.

We have all felt the disappointment of not having our prayers answered — at least not in the way we wish. Sometimes, perhaps, we do not want to hear God's answers, but what are we to make of the times when we cry out and God responds with silence?

This last question stands at the center of Shusaku Endo's *Silence*, a novel of historical fiction that follows the lives of three Portuguese Jesuit missionaries to Japan in the mid-1600s.



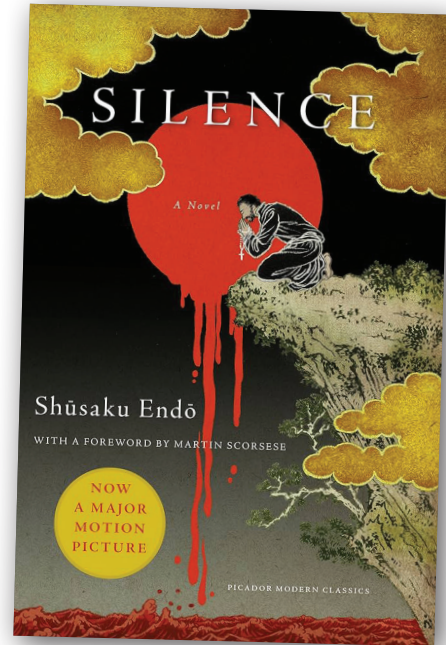
*Ann-Maria Contarino holds a master's degree in English literature from the University of Pennsylvania and a bachelor's degree in classics from Brown University. Since 1995, she has taught in the English Department at Saint Anselm College, where she also coordinates the Writing Center. Since 2004, she has facilitated a lively book discussion group at St. Raphael Parish in Manchester.*

## Bringing the Word to Japan

In this era of brutal persecution of Christians in Japan, word is sent back to Portugal that Father Christóvão Ferreira, the zealous leader of the Jesuit missionary efforts, has renounced his vows and disappeared.

His students in Portugal refuse to believe these reports. They obtain permission to seek their mentor and friend, and set out on a dangerous journey of nearly a year.

The narrative focuses largely on Father Sebastian Rodrigues, who, like Father Ferreira, will experience illness, betrayal, capture and torture. (Both characters are based on historical figures.)



Father Rodrigues witnesses the unspeakable torture of Christians, yet he refuses to renounce his faith, remaining steadfast and fervent in his prayers for strength and guidance. He willingly withstands unimaginable physical pain.

However, when his captors make him responsible for the continued torture of others, Father Rodrigues reaches a crossroads — should he betray God in order to spare others or should he sacrifice them in order to remain “faithful?”

Repeatedly, he prays for insight into why God allows such suffering. He asks God to show him an answer, but he hears nothing.

Eventually, Father Rodrigues does come to a resolution with God's help and grace. In the process, he experiences a depth of physical, emotional and spiritual pain that helps him to understand and to accept Father Ferreira's decision. (I have stopped short of revealing Father Rodrigues' choice out of consideration for those who would still like to read the novel.)

## God responds to his prayers

One of the most beautiful elements of this novel is the interplay between sound and silence. Not only is silence used to characterize the seemingly one-sided nature of Father Rodrigues' appeals to God, but this silence seems to mock, or even to negate, many other speech acts throughout the novel.

Consider, for example, the very idea of priesthood that lies at the center of Father Rodrigues' identity — both personal and public. Priesthood, as he understands it, is a vocation, a calling, a kind of speech act that is “heard” in heart, mind and spirit.

In choosing to “answer the call,” Father Rodrigues engages in a spiritual conversation in which he responds to God by saying “yes,” and he declares his acceptance aloud when taking his vows.

In the midst of his crisis, Father Rodrigues seeks a similar exchange, a response from God that would reinforce his own vocation. The contrast between the two situations

renders God's silence even more profound. It contrasts the empty echo of Rodrigues' prayers and the involuntary groans and screams of the captive Christians.

Father Rodrigues is a priest with a vocation, but also a man with a conscience. The sacrament of Holy Orders may have altered his status in the world, but it has not made him more valuable than any other human being in the sight of God.

How can he reconcile his refusal to recant with the resulting torture of others? Is he complicit with his persecutors because he does not spare the afflicted further suffering, even though he could do so? Recanting would require a simple act of speech on Rodrigues' part — a verbal declaration denying Jesus, along with the act of trampling on Jesus' image.

As missionaries, Fathers Rodrigues and Ferreira, and their companions, also speak publicly as the voice of a collective: the Church. They have gone to Japan to "spread the Good News" by proclaiming the Gospel

message and revealing Jesus as the Word.

The Church speaks with an authority both human and divine, yet in Japan, its words either fall on deaf ears or bring agony to those who hear and proclaim them. The fathers come to understand that the tenets of Christianity and the person of Jesus run counter to the ideals of virtue and honor in the foundation of Japanese culture.

Should Father Rodrigues interpret God's silence as proof that the Word cannot and should not attempt to convert the Japanese? Such questions torment Father Rodrigues as much as his physical torture, since advocating for an end to evangelization in Japan would be tantamount to renouncing his faith. It would entail a refusal to speak the Word.

God does eventually respond to Father Rodrigues' entreaties, as indeed He responds to each of us. May we abide patiently and keep a listening ear. May we stand ready to accept and act on what we hear. ■

## FOR NEXT TIME:

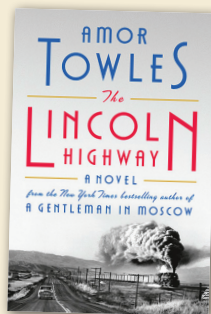
### *The Lincoln Highway*

By Amor Towles

We might be inclined to read this novel as a typical "road trip/buddy story" or a coming-of-age journey narrative — and it is, in part. It's also so much more: a poignant narrative of a young man at an ethical and moral crossroads.

Emmett Watson has just returned from a work farm after serving time for killing someone accidentally. Will he pursue a lawful path or give in to the bad influence of some of his fellow inmates? Will Emmett and his younger brother try to reclaim their past by finding their mother, or will they build their future by establishing a stable life together?

I hope that you will read along to discover the answers!



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