

FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life

Silence

In the early 1950s, Japanese writer Shusaku Endo encountered an exhibit in the art museum in Nagasaki that challenged him and inspired him to write the book that's considered to be his masterpiece. That piece of art was a simple wooden box with a bronze engraving of Christ on the cross. What truly captivated Endo was that the image had been rubbed smooth and was surrounded by the black marks of footprints where hundreds of feet had trampled on it long ago.

The item Endo saw was called a *fumie*. It had been created in the 17th century during a severe persecution of Christians in Japan. The footprints on the image were from peasants who were given a choice: Trample on it and renounce their faith, or face torture and death. Endo, who had been baptized a Roman Catholic Christian at the age of 11, asked himself, *Would I, too, have trampled on the image?*

The book that Endo wrote after this encounter, *Silence*, was published in 1966. It tells the story of two Portuguese missionaries who travel to Japan during the height of the persecution. One of them, Sebastian Rodrigues, writes letters to his superiors, and these form the bulk of the narrative. It's a life of danger and secrecy until betrayal leads to arrest.

Throughout the book, a question hangs over the story: Would the missionaries remain steadfast in the face of their captors; or would they apostatize, or renounce their faith, as their former mentor and predecessor in the Japanese mission, Christovao Ferreira, is rumored to have done? In the end, the crisis for Rodrigues is even more intense than he could've imagined. He's ordered to trample on a *fumie* and renounce his faith, not to save himself from torture and death, but to save three peasants who will be tortured until he steps on the image.

Martyrs

Among the many issues provoked by the novel—and now the movie—*Silence*, from questions about how the gospel is presented

The movie *Silence* explores the martyrdom of Japanese Christians and Portuguese missionaries in the 17th century. What is martyrdom? What questions does martyrdom raise for contemporary Christians?

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Core Bible Passages

Do we think of Jesus as a martyr? Martyrs give up their lives for their faith. In **John 10:14-18**, Jesus calls himself “the good shepherd.” He says that he lays down his life for the sheep. “No one takes it from me,” he says, “but I give it up because I want to.” Church tradition considers Stephen to be the first martyr, however. **Acts 7:54-60** describes his stoning, which took place after he gives a fiery sermon, contained in **verses 2-53**.

Paul, who was present at the stoning of Stephen, recognized that martyrdom was a real possibility. He understood that death meant being with Jesus, but living meant serving Jesus. **Philippians 1:21-26** expresses this thought—Paul believes he will live so that he can “help [the Philippians’] progress and the joy of [their] faith” (**verse 25**).

Paul was eventually martyred, and early Christians endured off-and-on bouts of persecution. Peter, also martyred in Rome, writes to those who suffer in **1 Peter 4:12-19**. He encourages them to honor God as they suffer and to be joyful, because suffering now leads to great joy later, “when his glory is revealed” (**verse 13**). These verses complement the passages from **Revelation** described in the main essay. **Second Timothy 2:12** expresses the same idea: “If we endure, we will also rule together.”

and received in different cultures to questions of class (most of the Christians the missionaries encounter are peasants in small villages), the most dramatic questions raised include those of suffering and martyrdom.

What is a martyr? The word is derived from a Greek term, *martus*, meaning witness. More specifically, it refers to a witness who “testifies to a fact of which he [or she] has knowledge from personal observation.” In this sense, all of the apostles were called to be martyrs. In **Acts 1:8**, Jesus tells them, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

Fairly quickly, within the lifetime of the apostles, the word began to mean more than a generic type of witnessing. **Revelation 2:13** describes Antipas, whom Jesus calls “my faithful witness,” and says that Antipas “was killed among you, where Satan lives.” Later, in **Revelation 6:9**, John says he “saw under the altar those who had been slaughtered on account of the word of God and the witness they had given.” In the second century, the term *martyr* came to refer almost exclusively to those who had paid the ultimate price as a witness to their faith.

The Church Honors Martyrs

The Christian church has honored martyrs from the beginning. During the persecutions of the Roman Empire, families of those who had been martyred were often permitted to bury the remains, and the gravesites were often considered sacred. Chapels have been found in the catacombs, and churches have been built over sites reputed to be the tombs of martyrs. For example, Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome is reputedly built over the tomb of the apostle Peter.

Early Christians also celebrated the anniversaries of martyrs’ deaths, “held at the grave of the deceased with prayer, oblations, Communion, and a reading of the martyr’s history of suffering and death,” according to *Christian History* magazine. Martyrdom was considered such an honor that the church had to act against the phenomenon of “volunteering,” wherein Christians actively sought to be killed for their faith. Ignatius of Antioch, a first-century bishop, wrote letters to the various churches along his route to Rome to be tried and martyred, asking them to take no action to prevent his death because he wished to be an “imitator of the passion of Christ, my God.”

Modern-day Martyrs

Though Christians might not have the same attitude toward martyrdom as in the early church, persecution and martyrdom still exist as a problem for the church today. In 2015, videos of members of the group Islamic State executing Christians were reported on by major news networks, drawing attention to the plight of Christians in some areas of the Middle East. Exactly how many Christian martyrs there have been, however, is harder to pin down than one might expect.

Donatism

In the “Core Bible Passages” sidebar, it’s clear that suffering has been a part of the church’s lot from Jesus to Stephen and beyond. There are many stories in Scripture and church history of those who suffered heroically for their faith. For every story we hear about a martyr, however, there are also other stories of those who didn’t remain steadfast.

What should be done with those who in some way gave in to their persecutors? This question has recurred over and over in church history. One iteration of this controversy developed in the fourth century. A group called the Donatists, who followed a bishop named Donatus of Casae Nigrae, argued that since one of the bishops involved in the ordination of another bishop had given a copy of the Scriptures over to the authorities to be burned, the ordination wasn’t valid.

The other party argued that an action of the church such as ordination, considered to be a sacrament by the Roman Catholic Church, was valid in itself no matter the purity of the minister who performed it. This point of view eventually won out, but not without much controversy, and even violence, which demonstrated that the debate had grown beyond the theological.

In 2012, the number of Christians martyred was either 1,200, as some groups reported, or over 100,000, as others reported. The disparity, it turns out, is because some groups define a martyr differently than others. Some groups count as martyrs those who are killed for their ethnicity, because ethnicity and religion are closely aligned in some areas.

“Cultural Christians killed in political or ethnic conflicts are not necessarily witnessing for their faith. Thus, they shouldn’t be counted as martyrs,” argues Nik Ripken of the Southern Baptist Convention’s International Mission Board, who investigated reports of martyrdom but was unable to substantiate many. There’s a concern for an accurate total, as underreporting may lead to little attention being paid to the issue; but defining it too broadly might dilute the term in a way that devalues, in a sense, the deaths of those killed specifically for bearing witness to their faith.

Confronted by Martyrdom

What questions does martyrdom raise for contemporary Christians? *Silence*, both the novel and the movie, provokes one major question: Why does God seem silent in the face of suffering? Martin Scorsese, in the foreword he wrote for the 2016 Picador Modern Classic publication of the novel, says, “[God] is always present . . . even in His silence.”

This insight can be gleaned from the novel, but the presence of God would still be difficult to discern in the midst of suffering. **The Book of Revelation**, particularly in the messages to the churches detailed in **Chapters 2 and 3**, however, describes the reward that’s held out for those who suffer persecution “even to the point of death,” which is “the crown of life” (2:10). “Those who emerge victorious,” it says, will be made “pillars in the temple of my God, and they will never leave it” (3:12).

Enduring suffering and hardship, then, leads to a great reward. But even with such promises, it’s difficult to remain steadfast with the prospect of suffering and death. What if someone threatened with suffering or with the suffering of others recants their faith? As the sidebar on this page explains, this question has been with the church as long as there have been martyrs.

What can Christians do to support those suffering persecution and in danger of being martyred? The Reverend Jack Amick, top executive for international disaster response of the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR), urges church members “not to forget about Syria and Iraq [where much of the hardship facing Christians is taking place] and to pray weekly for peace and an end to violent conflict around the world.”

UMCOR and organizations like it have a presence in many parts of the world where Christians are suffering persecution. Amick points out that though hearing about the trials these Christians are facing may break our hearts, “all human suffering *should* break our hearts such that we take action regardless of human divisions and labels of race, creed, religion.” Supporting the work of

“A Never-Ending Pilgrimage”

It wasn't until December 2016, 50 years after the novel *Silence* was published, that a major film version debuted, directed by Martin Scorsese. Scorsese was introduced to the novel almost 30 years ago and began reading it in 1989. Ever since then, he worked to bring the story to the big screen. Scorsese describes this effort as a “never-ending pilgrimage.”

Why did this story appeal to the 74-year-old director? In some ways, the story speaks to his own spiritual journey. In an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, Scorsese recalls a time in 1978 when he was hospitalized after collapsing, a product of overwork and abusing his body with drugs and hard living. While in the hospital, Scorsese remembered the Catholic faith he had embraced as a child and began to pray “to get through those 10 days and nights.” He felt, in that moment, that he had been saved for some reason. “And even if it wasn't for a reason,” he remembers, “I had to make good use of it.”

Scorsese feels the themes of faith and doubt that permeate the story in *Silence* match where he has been in his spiritual journey. “I'm a believer with some doubts,” he says, “But the doubts push me to find a purer sense of the other, a purer sense, if you want, of the word ‘God.’”

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organizations like UMCOR, with prayer and finances, could be a concrete step to show those who suffer that God is present to them, even if God seems silent.

United Methodist Perspective

The United Methodist Church doesn't have a system of recognized, or “canonized,” saints, nor is there a particular emphasis on martyrs in the denomination. There are, however, a few individuals who are officially recognized as martyrs by the church.

The first Methodist considered to have been martyred for his faith was William Seward. He was a lay preacher in Wales who was on his way to a town called Trevecca, where there was a Methodist training college. He was passing through a town called Hay-on-Wye when he decided to begin preaching. A disturbance broke out, and some people began throwing stones at him. Seward was struck in the head with a heavy stone and passed away from his injuries. It's reported that Seward regained consciousness before he died and asked that his assailant be forgiven.

There are a couple of modern men who, through resolutions at the General Conference, are recognized as martyrs by The United Methodist Church. The first of these is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran theologian who was killed in Nazi Germany in 1945. The other is Martin Luther King Jr. King has a Methodist connection, having attended Boston Theological Seminary, which is a United Methodist-related institution.

Helpful Links

- <https://spu.edu/depts/uc/response/autumn2k4/silence.asp> — This site gives a helpful synopsis of the novel *Silence*.
- <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09736b.htm> — This site offers an exhaustive discussion about the origin of the word *martyr*, along with links to many other related topics.

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Martyrdom and Christian Faith

What is martyrdom?
What questions does
martyrdom raise
for contemporary
Christians?

CREATE Your Teaching Plan

Keeping in mind your
group members and
your group time,
choose from among
the OPEN, EXPLORE,
and CLOSE activities
or from “Teaching
Alternative” to plan
the session.

OPEN the Session

Pray Together

Pray this prayer or create one of your own: Loving God, we thank you for the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us and paved the way for our own journeys of faith. Be with us as we study today. Help us to hear your voice speaking. May we have strength to follow you wherever you might lead. Amen.

EXPLORE the Topic

Reflect on “*Silence*”

Read or review highlights from the section entitled “*Silence*.” Ask: What thoughts or feelings occurred to you as you read this overview? How did you respond to the description of trampling on the fumble? to renouncing your faith in order to save others?

Define *Martyr*

Read or review highlights from “Martyrs.” Ask: How do you understand the term *martyr*? How do you respond to the literal definition of the Greek word *martus*, which means witness, or telling what one knows through “personal observation”? What feelings or thoughts do you have about the witness of someone who suffers or dies for their faith?

Discuss “The Church Honors Martyrs”

Read or review highlights from this section. Ask: How do you respond to the practice of building churches over the remains of martyrs? to celebrating anniversaries of the deaths of martyrs with “prayer, oblations, Communion, and a reading of the martyr’s history of suffering and death”? Why do you think “volunteering” to be a martyr became such an issue? How do you think such practices affected the witness and growth of the early church?

Reflect on “Modern-day Martyrs”

Read or review highlights from this section. Ask: What stories have you heard about martyrs in the news within the last few years? Do you see a difference between someone who is killed simply because they belong to an ethnic group that is Christian and someone who is killed because they will not renounce their faith? If so, what? How do you respond to the statement, “Defining [the term *martyr*] too broadly might dilute the term in a way that devalues, in a sense, the deaths of those killed specifically for bearing witness to their faith”?

Discuss “Confronted by Martyrdom”

Read or review highlights from this section. Ask: Is the question, “Why does God seem silent in the face of suffering?” one that you would have asked before today? Why do you think God allows people of faith to suffer? Though it’s difficult for us to imagine, do you think the words from Scripture quoted in this section would be comforting in the midst of persecution? Can you

think of ways to support Christians who are undergoing persecution other than what's described here?

Have a Bible Study

Review the “Core Bible Passages” section and Scriptures together. Ask: Does the fact that Jesus lays down his life willingly, as the quote from John’s Gospel attests, make him a martyr? Why would or wouldn’t we consider Jesus to be a martyr? What parallels do you see between the death of Jesus and the death of Stephen, traditionally considered to be the first Christian martyr? What does the passage from Philippians teach about the concept of “volunteering,” discussed in the main essay? What do each of these Scripture passages say to you about martyrdom? about witnessing to Christian faith?

Talk About “Donatism”

Read or review highlights from this sidebar. Ask: What feelings or thoughts do you have about the bishop who gave his Bible to his persecutors to be burned? Why do you think fourth-century Christians were concerned about the validity of the sacraments presided over by clergy who had colluded with the authorities? How do you respond to the notion of the validity of a sacrament regardless of the purity of the minister?

Discuss “United Methodist Perspective”

Read or review highlights from this section. Ask: How often do we hear about martyrs in The United Methodist Church? Why do you think this topic isn’t often considered? Had you heard of William Seward before? Why do you think the two men described have been singled out and recognized as martyrs in this way? Do you think others might be worthy of this kind of recognition?

Reflect on “A Never-Ending Pilgrimage”

Read or review highlights from this sidebar. Ask: Have you ever read a book or seen a movie or other work of art that has had an impact on you like *Silence* had on Martin Scorsese? Have you had a time in your life, like Scorsese’s illness, that became a kind of “spiritual awakening”? How do you respond to Scorsese’s journey of faith, which he has indicated has been characterized by an oscillation between faith and doubt? What does the quote from Scorsese that ends the section mean to you?

CLOSE the Session

Pray Together

Say this prayer or one of your own: Lord God, we are aware that people all over the world are suffering today because they believe in you. May we, who worship in relative comfort and peace, become more aware of their sufferings and work as we can to alleviate them. Thank you for allowing us to worship you in freedom. May we never take this for granted. Be with us as we go forth from this place. Help us to be bold and courageous in sharing our faith with others; in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Teaching Alternative

Consider hosting a book club to read the novel *Silence* together, and invite other members of your congregation. Consider also taking a group to see the film or hosting a gathering when it becomes available on DVD.

Next Week in
FaithLink
Connecting Faith and Life

Protecting God’s Creatures

China recently announced it will ban all sales of ivory by the end of 2017. How will this ban support efforts of conservationists to protect elephants and other animals? How does our Christian faith guide us as we respond to issues of animal slaughter and the marketing of goods obtained from wildlife?