

*On the Set of SILENCE*  
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He looked nothing like *The Amazing Spiderman* I had seen on the big screen, a superhuman acrobat leaping and soaring above the crowds, performing spellbinding feats of strength and speed with deadly accuracy. When I first met Andrew Garfield on the set of *SILENCE* during production at Taipei's Central Motion Picture Studios, he looked like an austere monk after a 40-day fast in the desert. He also looked a bit like an image of Jesus. This Hollywood superstar, Andrew Garfield, had been transformed from *Spiderman* into a Portuguese Jesuit missionary fleeing anti-Christian oppressors in 17<sup>th</sup> century Japan for Martin Scorsese's long-awaited film. My responsibility was to help coach him and his co-stars how to perform the Catholic Mass in Latin, how to hear Confession, and other duties of a Catholic missionary!

Actually, to prepare himself for the role of Fr. Sebastian Rodrigues, Andrew had studied the Catholic Latin Mass so thoroughly and learned the liturgical gestures so accurately, that my job was easy. In fact, he probably could have taught me a few things about how Mass was celebrated in those days. And I have been a Jesuit missionary for over 40 years!

Before coming to Taiwan in the spring of 2015, Andrew had many sessions, over the course of six months, with Fr. James Martin, a well-known Jesuit writer, spiritual guide and media personality in New York. Fr. Jim directed Andrew in a Jesuit-style retreat called the *Spiritual Exercises*. Adam Driver and Liam Neeson also met with Father Martin several times, in order to help them understand and prepare for their roles as Jesuit missionaries.

In our first conversation, Andrew told me that this experience turned out to be more than just preparation for his movie role, but an important stage in his own, personal spiritual search. By meditating on the life of Jesus and using imagination to contemplate his works and words, a retreatant comes to know Jesus and develop a personal relationship with him that can be very deep and very emotional. This had happened to Andrew. Fr. Jim told me how impressed he had been with the devotion and depth of Andrew's retreat. Andrew shared highlights of his spiritual journey with me. He also told me that continuing it in a world of big egos and fierce competition for professional success, media attention, and the rewards these bring, was quite a challenge.

As I watched him rehearse the scene where Fr. Rodrigues says Mass, I could find no mistakes whatsoever in his gestures, his reading of the text, or even his Latin pronunciation. I thought, "No wonder Fr. Jim had told me that Andrew would make a good Jesuit priest!" And like the film's Director, Martin Scorsese, Andrew had paid attention to every detail.

Then, suddenly, I realized there was something strange about the Latin Missal (Mass book) that Andrew was reading from. In those days, the text that the priest read was printed in black ink, while instructions for the accompanying gestures were printed in red ink. I mentioned that the missal which had been recreated beautifully by the prop department had mistakenly done just the opposite: text in red, gestures in black. Although this seemed like a small detail and may not even have been noticeable on the screen, near panic erupted on the set! The artists and prop people immediately went into action, and a few moments before the scene was shot, a new and perfectly accurate Missal had been produced.

Scorsese's attention to detail and his demand for accuracy are legendary. This explained the consternation whenever a mistake or oversight was uncovered or even suspected. Scorsese himself was present every day, scrutinizing every detail, noticing every sound (he insisted on silence on the set during rehearsals and filming), and calling for repeated takes of scenes if he was not completely satisfied.

I witnessed one scene that was reshot over a dozen times because Scorsese felt that the performance of one of the actors could be improved. He never showed impatience with the actor who seemed to be having some trouble getting his part exactly right. He just kept encouraging him, saying "It's developing. It's developing. One more time!"

During rehearsal for a scene where Adam Driver, playing Fr. Garupe, was attending the baptism of a baby by a village elder, Scorsese seemed concerned about something. "Fr. Garupe should be doing something in this scene, not just looking on. Ask the Father what he should be doing!" Being the "Father" on duty that day, I tried to think of something as everyone on the set stared at me in expectation. Finally, I suggested that Adam could be holding a towel ready to dry the baby's forehead. "Right! Right! Bring Adam a towel," ordered the Director. Almost instantly a pile of 20 or 30 towels appeared before me: large, small, thick, thin, colored, plain. Apparently, I had become the local expert in baptismal towels! "Father, which one?" I was asked. Although I had never seen a 17<sup>th</sup> century Japanese towel, I had faced similar decisions while directing a docudrama about St. Francis Xavier in Japan many years ago. I hesitantly selected one that seemed consistent with the scene set in a poor Japanese village. It passed inspection; the scene was shot; the Director was satisfied; and everyone was relieved!

Andrew Garfield impressed me both as a serious and accomplished actor and a young man searching for life's deeper meaning. Sometimes, these two ambitions seemed to overlap as he filmed *SILENCE*. Andrew asked me about certain apparent contradictions in the life of a Jesuit priest. He was especially interested in the deep emotions and passion that

drives and sustains a Jesuit during his lifetime mission of service and self-sacrifice. But he had also noticed the need for a Jesuit to keep his emotions and feelings under control, sometimes to the point of suppressing or hiding them. Why was this? To appear strong? To safeguard his celibacy? Fear of losing control? What was the proper balance? I'm sure he had Fr. Rodrigues in mind when he posed these questions.

I tried to share with him my own experiences that illustrated the fine line that a Jesuit sometimes has to walk when expressing his emotions. For instance, if he expresses his affection too freely and carelessly, he may find himself entangled in a relationship inconsistent with his vow of celibacy. On the other hand, if he hides or suppresses his true feelings, he may appear cold, distant and unconcerned to the very people with whom he wants to share and witness to God's love. Individual personality and age also have to be factored into the equation.

I told Andrew that a Jesuit might sometimes feel he must appear strong and confident in order to reassure his people and confirm their faith in the Gospel. He may hide his own doubts and temptations and even in times of crisis, as in the case of Fr. Rodrigues, question the very existence of God.

This conversation came to mind when I watched Andrew in a scene with his Japanese companion and guide, Kichijiro, portrayed by Yōsuke Kubozuka, certainly one of the most fascinating characters in both the novel and the movie. Kichijiro, who has denied his faith more than once, constantly disappoints and disgusts Fr. Rodrigues because he is so weak and repeatedly displays his weakness shamelessly in many ways, including betrayal. Fr. Rodrigues, on the other hand, strives with all his might to remain strong and indomitable even to the point of facing martyrdom for his faith. He avoids showing, or even, facing his own weakness. But Kichijiro sees through this façade and the consequences are devastating for the missionary.

In this particular scene, Kichijiro has offered to help Rodrigues avoid capture by the Japanese who are pursuing him; but, like Judas, he has another plan in mind. While they are hiding in the wilderness, Kichijiro admits to Rodrigues that he does not have the strength and courage of his fellow Christians who were martyred for their faith. "It's not fair," he complains. "If I had lived during a time when there was no oppression, I would have been a good Christian ... but I am weak ... In this world, where is there a place for a weak man like me?" Fr. Rodrigues seemed unable to respond to Kichijiro's question. Andrew's portrayal reflected perfectly the inner turmoil a Jesuit might feel in such a situation: struggling to appear strong and confident while concealing his fear, doubts and sense of helplessness.

As I watched this dialogue being enacted in the forested hills of northern Taiwan, I found myself choking back tears. I was moved to compassion for both protagonists. Afterwards, I remarked to Scorsese, "I think all of us may have sometime experienced these two personalities battling within us: at times we feel strong and indomitable, refusing to give in to or even acknowledge our weaknesses; and other times we are so deeply aware of our helplessness that we lose all hope of ever again being strong and in control of our life." Scorsese beamed and said "Exactly!"

Both the novel and the film view our weakness and failures from the viewpoint of a compassionate God, willing to forgive our most wicked and shameless actions. As Pope Francis remarked recently, "There is no sin that cannot be reached by God's mercy."

Kichijiro, in many ways a Judas figure, apparently never lost his faith in God's mercy and forgiveness. Ironically, he may even have surpassed Rodrigues in this regard. He was constantly begging the missionary to hear his confession and grant him absolution, even after turning him over to the Japanese authorities and imprisonment. Here, he is much different from the character of Judas, who lost all hope and hung himself.

When I first met Kubozuka on the set of SILENCE, he was preparing for one of Kichijiro's confession scenes. I told him that I was a priest and would be happy to help him prepare or answer any questions he might have. He looked at me with an amused expression and said "Thank you, Father, but I have already confessed MANY times!" Indeed, this was true; he obviously didn't need my help! Every time he "confessed" his performance was completely convincing; and I told him so.

After a few days on the set, I begin to realize my role was not just to supervise religious ceremonies and offer corrections or suggestions, but the actors also appreciated getting my reaction to their performances. Andrew said that gave him "energy." Kubozuka humbly acknowledged that his striking voice and natural acting ability were "gifts" that he was grateful for.

Andrew's spiritual preparation served him well during his scenes ministering to the Catholics who were imprisoned with him awaiting torture. During one of these scenes, he is leading the Christians in reciting Psalm 62 (personally chosen by Scorsese himself): "For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken." Kneeling on the prison floor like a Japanese monk in front of these suffering and abandoned people, Andrew's Fr. Rodrigues was spot on. At this moment, he had become like Jesus, consoling and instilling hope among his flock as they awaited an uncertain and possibly terrifying fate. The faces and expressions of the Japanese actors reacted and reflected their hopes and fears as Andrew recited the psalm.

The scene was so lifelike and evocative that my mind went back many years to the day a French Jesuit and I celebrated Mass in the wilderness on the Thai-Cambodian border for a group of Vietnamese Catholic refugees whose camp had been shelled and obliterated on the previous night. They didn't ask for food or water or anything material. They only wanted to have Mass. That alone would give them hope.

After completing the scene, Andrew asked me for my reaction. I was so moved I could barely speak. From the look on my face, I'm sure he knew how magnificently real and powerful that scene had been.

However, in spite of his deep faith in God, his "fortress," Fr. Rodrigues was shaken, time and time again, in the face of God's silence during his terrible suffering.

When Kichijiro repeatedly comes to the missionary begging for confession after betraying him, Rodrigues can barely raise his hand in absolution, so deep is his anger and disgust. When he hears the Christians moaning in pain from the pit in which they have been suspended for days, he can bear God's silence no longer and begins to shout and scream in agony. Like Jesus on the cross, he feels abandoned and forsaken by God.

As Andrew prepared for this scene, he seemed dissatisfied with his performance. Normally polite and gentle with everyone, suddenly Andrew shocked everyone on the set by an explosion of shouting and cursing. He seemed to have completely lost control over himself. Nevertheless, Scorsese called for "action," Andrew became the agonized Fr. Rodrigues in the throes of despair, and the scene was perfect! Andrew immediately apologized to everyone on the set for his outburst.

Later I told Scorsese that at the time I didn't know if Andrew was acting or if he was actually having a breakdown. Scorsese looked at me with wide eyes and said "Neither did I!" When I asked Andrew about this later, he said, "No, no! I was having the time of my life!" As a method actor, he had needed to do something drastic to put him in the same state of helpless frustration and fury that Fr. Rodrigues was experiencing in his agony. That outburst did the trick. Clearly Scorsese had great trust in the abilities of this remarkably talented and dedicated young actor.

SILENCE has been described as Martin Scorsese's "passion film," because he became fascinated, almost obsessed, with the story when he first read the novel in 1989, in Japan. The religious themes and spiritual conflicts seemed to resonate with experiences and stages in his own life.

But *passion* has another meaning too: it can refer to a prolonged *agony*, like the *passion* of Christ. Scorsese was passionate about making this highly challenging, non-commercial film; and it turned out to be for him a passion or agony as well. I watched him, wrapped in thick coats and scarves, wade through mud to direct scenes on cold, rainy days in the lush mountainous forests of Taiwan. While filming on Taiwan's scenic beaches in scorching weather, he needed ice packs to ward off heat exhaustion. When the chirping and squawking of Taiwan's very vocal birds, or noise from a nearby school event, proved unstoppable, he and his cast and crew of several hundred had to wait patiently for frequently evasive *silence* before they could resume filming.

One of the film's producers approached me one day begging me to pray that there would be no more delays in production, because they were way behind schedule and way over budget. Investors and banks were getting nervous, and some might be on the verge of withdrawing their support. This would be devastating and would jeopardize or possibly end the entire project. On advice from a companion, I notified Taiwan's Carmelite Sisters (a contemplative order devoted to praying for those in dire need). The good sisters prayed. The crisis was averted!

Finally, the film was finished and Scorsese's *passion* for this project will gradually be rewarded. His other *passion*—the agony he had to endure to produce the film—is but a memory. Or maybe that is just how it looked to me. Perhaps throughout this whole ordeal, for one whose love of filmmaking is so profound, Scorsese, like Andrew, was actually "having the time of his life!"

Either way, Martin Scorsese has produced a masterful, evocative, and powerful work of art that is sure to captivate and disturb as it inspires moviegoers worldwide. Could it also help viewers to experience God's compassionate presence, even during tragic and troubled times when He seems so distant and silent?

Footnote: When production was nearly complete, I suggested to Scorsese that Pope Francis would be pleased with this film. Perhaps he should go to Rome and visit the Pope, who had once wanted to be a missionary to Japan. Scorsese suddenly looked shocked, almost fearful. "The Pope?" he exclaimed, probably thinking of some of his past "sins." "Don't worry," I said. "You can go to confession first!" Scorsese laughed. When he returned to Taipei in January 2017, he told me that he did in fact go to visit Pope Francis. I didn't ask him if he went to confession first!