Since its appearance in 1966 in Japan Shusaku Endo’s novel 沈黙 (Silence) has occasioned quite pointed debates over virtually all of the major themes of Catholic theology, from the doctrine of God, Christology, the nature of faith, the meaning of martyrdom, ecclesiology, priesthood, conscience, and of course evangelization and inculturation. Many of these debates were reignited by Martin Scorsese’s 2016 film adaptation, especially over the interpretation of the protagonist, Fr. Sebastian Rodrigues’s apparent “apostasy,” done in answer to what he believes is Christ’s silence-breaking command. Much of the debate, though, misses the deeper meaning and promise of Endo’s novel, especially how Endo implicitly constructed a series of Zen (禪) enigmas called Koans (公案) which he then combined with key dynamics of the 3rd Week of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola in portraying Rodrigues’ journey through the novel, culminating finally in his “hearing” the voice of God he thought too long “silent.” Seen in this light Rodrigues experiences a kenotic emptying of his religious and cultural understandings of Europe, Japan, Christianity, the Catholic Church, priesthood, the Sacraments, the laity, etc. which facilitates the moment of partial Satori (Enlightenment). This also differentiates him from the literary foils in the novel, namely the two other Portuguese Jesuit missionaries--his teacher and hero, Christovao Ferreira, and his companion Francisco Garrpe--as well as the recidivist apostate Kichijiro. Endo’s novel thus can both illustrate and develop the element of “cross-fertilization” in inculturation in which some of the insights on the areas of theology enumerated above, are still taking root in the non-Christian Japanese culture, as well as how these reflections may deepen insights and approaches to the faith that have been masked in the more traditional Christian cultures.

Slide 1
All I can do here in the brief time allotted is to frame my thesis and highlight some of the key points, which I believe will support it. Clearly more work needs to be done, and I’m going to move a relatively quick pace, presuming that you will be able to follow my presentation in the accompanying handout. The Power Point is available at my web-site listed on the first slide, along with my e-mail.

Slide 2 (Abstract)

A key aspect of Endo’s novel comes in the dynamics of Zen (禪) enigmas called Koans (公案). Combined with key dynamics of the 3rd Week of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola in portraying Rodrigues’ journey through the novel, this enables the protagonist finally to “hear” the voice of God thought too long to be “silent.” First, though must come a kenotic emptying of religious and cultural understandings of Europe, Japan, Christianity, the Catholic Church, priesthood, the Sacraments, the laity, etc. which then can facilitate the moment of partial Satori (Enlightenment).

Slide 3
In this third slide I am putting down a few of the presumptions I am making about those gathered here in this room. I’ll not go into any of these bullet points here, though would be happy to expand on them if any time remains, or at any other time during our Conference time together. The slides that follow (4-7) likewise are pretty basic to our discipline, so I shall not linger on them very much either.

Slide 4
Culture As Framework

- Culture as our principal mode of being human, thus the way we are truly human beings
- There is no such thing as a non-cultural or “a-cultural” human being
- Thus, to speak of “human nature” one must do so always in a cultural context

Slide 5

The Truth about Evangelization

- “Evangelization is to be achieved, not from without, as though by adding some decoration or applying a coat of color, but in depth, going to the very center and roots of life. The gospel must impregnate the culture and the whole way of life of men & women.”
  Evangelii nuntiandi, 20

Slide 6
Competing Paradigms

- Only God Can Know the Whole of Reality
- Thus for the rest of us this knowledge is necessarily incomplete and partial, and we tend to understand complex realities according to models and paradigms
- Can we speak of authentic cultural paradigms for theology & even ethics?
- Necessary Openness to Revision of All Paradigms—especially in light of new insights

Slide 7

Ethnocentrism

- *Culture tends to produce ethnocentrism as a way of viewing the world and especially other cultures in terms of one’s own culture.*
- *Ethnocentrism is a natural result of culture’s functioning, but poses great challenges to intercultural communication*
- *Can we speak of theological “ethnocentrism” too?*

Slide 8

Our Jesuit main characters, Ferreira, Valignano, Garrpe and Rodrigues all have actual historical counter-parts and as Jesuits I think it safe to say that they had been formed in the Western and Jesuit view of the universe, i.e., theological ethnocentrism ---represented here in an image to
illustrate from the trompe l’oeil “dome” of the Church of San Ignazio in Rome. Christ is still the “center,” but just barely, and his light is beamed onto St. Ignatius, and is then refracted to the 4 corners of the known world and received by a Jesuit saint, if available, such as Francis Xavier for Asia (in the lower right-hand corner).

**Ethnocentrism & the Apotheosis of St. Ignatius**

![Image](image_url)

**Slide 9**

Here we have the “model” Missionary, Francis Xavier---and to a point I believe he represents the real foil to Sebastian Rodrigues in Endo’s *Silence*. As my dissertation director, Fr. Jaques Dupuis, used to observe, Xavier was canonized not for his theology, but his zeal, and Xavier believed mightily in Cyprian’s axiom *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus est*—outside of the Church there is no salvation, and this theology impelled generations of missionaries to baptize and preach the Gospel---often in that order, so as to win as many poor souls as possible for eternal salvation. Certainly that would have been the regnant theological world view of our novel’s characters.
But now we need to turn to our novel.

Very briefly stated, my thesis revolves around the premise that *nolens volens* Shusaku Endo (遠藤 周作 *Endō Shūsaku*, March 27, 1923 – September 29, 1996) utilizes a lot of the Japanese
religious cultural tradition that is found especially in Zen Buddhism and that a bit of more direct attention to this tradition will uncover aspects of his novel that escape many Westerners, and also correct some rather glaring misconstruals and misunderstandings surrounding Endo’s theological positions implicit in the 1966 novel *Silence* (沈黙: Chinmoku)

**Slide 11**

Now on to the novel itself. Slide 11 takes us to the opening social location of Rome (that’s the Jesuit headquarters in the foreground and St. Peter’s in the background [though at the time of the novel our Jesuit curia was located in the complex which houses the Church of the Gesu and the Rooms of St. Ignatius a short stroll from the Quirinale, then the Apostolic Palace]). Relocating successfully from “Rome” to “Japan” will take much more than an arduous sea voyage.

**Slide 12**
So let us now turn in Slide 12 ff more explicitly to some of the key practices and concepts associated which Zen Buddhism, which is one of the core cultural religious aspects of what Samurai Lord Inoue calls the “swamp” of Japan. The Ideogram 禪 for what in Japanese is pronounced “Zen” (and Chan in Chinese and Son in Korean) connotes a regimen of deep meditation that aims at breaking down and removing attachments, rational thought constructs and distractions that hinder one from achieving personal enlightenment that results in a freedom to escape the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

Slide 13
Slide 13 shows a typical Zen practice of facing the wall, seated in a fairly rigid posture that would be accompanied by a meditative breathing pattern to aid in this ascetical practice. One aspect of Tibetan Buddhism underscores the need to remove “afflictive emotions” that hinder this achievement of spiritual freedom. *Klesa* can be not only things like lust, but also values and commitments which may be “good” or “worthy” in themselves, but if they take on an excessive importance they function then as afflictive emotions which tie one down. In Ignatian vocabulary we’d call these “inordinate attachments” and in the novel *Silence* the Jesuit priests exhibit many layers of *Klesa* in their attachment to understandings of the Church, priesthood, Christianity, Europe, and their personal valor—to name just a few. Rodrigues states in the beginning of the novel that they arrived with absolutely “no baggage to bring to Japan except our own hearts” (p.22) and the unintended irony of that deeply mistaken self-assessment becomes progressively, and painfully, clearer as the novel unfolds.

**Slide 14**
Slide 13 gives us the Ideogram for *Satori* and is comprised of three other ideograms: “heart” to the left, “five” on top and “mouth” on the bottom, and together these connote “I” as in the self. To the right we see a famous Zen well in the Golden Temple of Ryonji in Kyoto which uses the “mouth” ideogram in a kind of riddle to produce the phrase “I know only contentment,” which is certainly a by-product of *Satori*. *Satori* I posit can be Christianized and Endo does this by using some key concepts and practices from Ignatian spirituality (Slide 15), and it is important to keep in mind that he was well-acquainted with Jesuits, especially at Tokyo’s Sophia University (上智大学 Jōchi Daigaku, literally “great school of advanced wisdom”)
Based on my own understanding of this tradition I believe that Rodrigues himself is engaged in a number of the core dynamics of the *Spiritual Exercises* which I have pictured here in Slide 15

**Slide 16**

**Enemy or Opponent as Possible Facilitator or Aid to Enlightenment**

- Lord Inoue as representative of Samurai & failed convert
- Christianity not suited to grow in the “swamp” of Japan
- Christianity counter-productive to Japanese well-being

Slide 16 pictures Lord Inoue, the Samurai and former convert, who leads the persecution of Christians, concentrating on flushing out the hidden foreign priests. One aspect of Zen
philosophy is that an “enemy” can also be an important facilitator on the path to Enlightenment, and I believe this would be a more helpful lens to view him in *Silence*, rather than simply casting him as a determined antagonist.

**Slide 17**

![Ignatian Koan: 3rd Degree of Humility Identification with Xt.](image)

Chief among these is coming to the freedom to desire the so-called Third Degree of Humility, which I argue functions very much as a Christian Koan, and which is quoted here in Slide 17. As a Jesuit Rodrigues would have been formed to pray for this special grace, and throughout the novel he does “see” himself like Christ, though until the critical moment of his apparent “apostasy,” he sees that similarity as enobling himself in the eyes of other Christians. Only when his act of trampling on the fumie does he allow himself to be subjected “truly” to be rated as worthless and a fool in the eyes of those who “count” in his own eyes---fellow Christians, Jesuits, and the public at large.

**Slide 18**
Here in Slide 18 we come to the critical test of faith---when the long “silence” of God is broken and he hears the voice of Christ telling him to “Trample!” because it was precisely for this trampling by others that Christ came into the world, and now Rodrigues will share that ignominy as well.

Slide 19
When I saw the movie for the first time, just as Rodrigues was about to put his foot on the *fumie* image of Christ, an older woman spontaneously shouted out “Don’t do it!” I think that negative reaction was captured by many, and for me underscores the key, crucial, and common misunderstanding about the meaning of that act. Several others have joined their voices to my one-time movie companion, and here I lift up one of the more vocal---Bishop Robert Barron, pictured here in Slide 19, who is a promoter of a very different, and more “robust” understanding of the priesthood and seminary formation which he as packaged in a very popular YouTube video entitled “Heroic Priesthood” (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TaoqdKz4m5E&t=65s). Clearly he views Endo’s protagonist Rodrigues as a failure, and not in accord with the theological vision of the “Heroic Pope” St. John Paul II. (He also has published another Youtube video on his analysis of Scorsese’s film version of “Silence” cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Th7Tiz1cEk). It’d be fascinating to put Barron’s videos in a contrast with scenes from *Silence* but that will have to be a project for another time.

**Slide 20**
Time does not allow for continuing to probe my thesis more deeply, but here in Slide 20 I picture a few of the “clues” that Endo himself gives to support his own theology and its complement sub-aspects of understanding more deeply the salvific mission of Jesus Christ, the sacramental economy of the Church, what priesthood ultimately entails and how the faith of even the most simple low class non-European Japanese peasants has much to teach us all about the true meaning of being united with Christ in Paradiso.

Slide 21
Cross-Fertilization of Truth

• If inculturation leads to new understanding of moral truth then cross-cultural ethics may help produce a broader and deeper understanding akin to the model of cross-fertilization
• As inculturation bears fruit in evangelization then this new fruit should be enjoyed by all
• This can be a tested expression of both the Sensus plenior & the Consensus fidelium
Slides 22 illustrates through meditative calligraphy a key concept of Zen that unfortunately we will not have time to pursue sufficiently here. Taken together they underscore the connectedness of all things, and highlight the counter-productiveness of striving to “achieve” a goal through one’s own efforts (Wu-wei or principle of “no action”).

Slide 23

For the priest the mystical power to confect the Eucharist, to bring Christ to the altar in transforming the bread and wine into his Body and Blood, is seen by many—including Rodrigues—as the apex of priestly power. But I believe Endo’s particular Gospel insight is that the Eucharist was not the primary reason Christ came into the world and that this confection power is not in fact the most important or enduring service a priest can perform. Rather, the key ministry is the forgiveness of sins and this is what Rodrigues can and does do even when he has lost the ability to celebrate Mass. The last action recounted in the novel that Rodrigues does is to once again celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation with Kichijiro (pp. 190-191) and in that moment Rodrigues experiences solidarity and compassion with the Lord—the true grace of the whole of the Spiritual Exercises.

Slide 24

Much more can be said, and hopefully my forthcoming book will flesh out many more of these points. But for now I believe this is a good place to “rest” in the Lord whose Rising Sun and Setting Rays illumine our Morally Complex World.
Mt 5:44-5: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.