

The Real Life of "Silence's" Character

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The story of Fr. Christovao Ferreira, a character in the adapted movie Silence by Martin Scorsese.

We thank Fr. Thomas Onoda, a Japanese priest of the Society of Saint Pius X who provided us with this detailed life of Father Christovao Ferreira. Fr. Onoda's source is "The Case of Christovao Ferreira" written by Fr. Walter Cieslik, S.J and published in Monumenta Nipponica in 1974. [See more about Fr. Onoda's work in this recent article \(https://sspx.org/en/news-events/news/interview-fr-onoda-sspx-japan\)](https://sspx.org/en/news-events/news/interview-fr-onoda-sspx-japan)

Portugal and Japan

Christovão Ferreira was born around the year 1580, in the Portuguese village of Torres Vedras in the Archdiocese of Lisbon.

Ferreira entered the Society of Jesus in 1596. After having done his two-year novitiate, he took his first vows at Coimbra on December 25, 1598.

On April 4, 1600, 20 Jesuits embarked at Lisbon under the direction of Fr. Pedro de Almeida. Ferreira was one of the twenty, which include Diogo Carvalho, future missionary and martyr in Japan. They reached Goa successfully and on 1 May 1601, those destined for China and Japan sailed to Macao.

In Macao, the Portuguese colonial center in East Asia, the Jesuits had the central seminary for missionaries destined to work in China and Japan: the Madre de Deus College. Ferreira continued his studies at Macao. In 1608 he was ordained to the priesthood. On May 16, 1609, Ferreira sailed for Japan and reached Nagasaki on 29 June. He was sent to the seminary at Arima to learn the Japanese language. He learned the language quickly, and already in 1614, he understood the language well and his sermons in Japanese were good.

The Persecution

In 1612 the local daimyo, Arima Harunobu, who had been one of the patrons of the mission, was banished from his domain and was condemned to death. So, in June 1612, the seminary and most of the missionaries had to leave the region of Arima and took refuge in Nagasaki.

In the same year, Ferreira was sent from Nagasaki to Kyoto, then the capital of Japan, but in April or May 1612 the Jesuits had to leave their residence, under pressure from the local authorities.

On Christmas 1613, the Church in Kyoto celebrated the liturgy peacefully, with the number of Catholics living in the capital and its suburb which numbered 30,000 to 40,000. But immediately after Christmas, an edict of religious census was issued only for Christians unexpectedly. On seeing this dangerous development, the faithful did the 40-Hours Devotion, fasting, and other penances.

On February 12, a government decree was issued ordering all priests, Brothers and catechists to proceed to Nagasaki and there await further instructions. Some missionaries remained in the capital secretly. Fr. Balthasar de Torres chose to remain in Osaka, while Fr. Bento Fernández and Fr. Ferreira stayed in Kyoto.

The church and two cemetery chapels in Kyoto were dismantled. 70 noble Christians of Kyoto and Osaka were exiled to Tsugaru on April 13, while the nuns were told to go to Nagasaki and thence into exile with the missionaries.

Provincial's Secretary

In October 1617, Fr. Matheus de Couros was assigned as Provincial. Fr. Ferreira, who had been asked to serve as his secretary, returned to Nagasaki. Fr. de Couros, was handicapped by sickness, even at times completely paralyzed, so a great part of his work fell to his secretary. In December 1618, Fr. Spinola, the province treasurer, was arrested, and Ferreira had also to take over his work of treasurer.

In 1621, the missionaries learned from the Portuguese ambassador the reasons the shogun gave for the persecution. He imagined that Catholic missionaries intend to rob him of his kingdom by the preaching of the Gospel. This suspicion was constantly being attested by the Protestant Dutch. This was also supported by Fabian, a former apostate Jesuit Brother, through his publication against the Catholics.

A new nomination letter arrived from Rome in 1621, assigning Fr. Francisco Pacheco as Provincial. Fr. Ferreira replaced Pacheco's mission at central Japan. But on February 1625, Pacheco was arrested, and on June 20, 1626, he was burned at the stake along with eight other Jesuits. Fr. Couros took over the administration of the province once again and recalled Ferreira to act as his secretary until the death of Couros in 1632.

Last Report

From 1627 to 1632, Ferreira compiled an account of the martyrdom of numerous Christians in the region of Takaku, and in the sulphur springs of Unzen. He wrote a moving description of the torture suffered by the Japanese Jesuit Antonio Ishida and his companions, who despite inhuman torments could not be persuaded to apostatize. This was Ferreira's last report on the martyrdoms.

After Fr Couros's death in 1632, without the nomination of a successor, Sebastião Vieira, as the senior professed Jesuit in Japan, took over the administration of the province until his arrest in 1633. Following that, Ferreira succeeded the post as locum tenens exercising authority until a new appointment of Provincial.

New Torture: *Ana-Tsurushi*

One of the most violent phase of Japan history against Catholics took place from March 1633 to August 1634, especially in Nagasaki. The government started a systematic search for priests and faithful together with a new kind of torture, the "ana-tsurushi," the pit. Here is an account from a 1633 letter dispatched by a Jesuit in the Philippines.

" They dug a pit some feet deep, and above it they erected a frame from which the body was hung up by the feet. To prevent the blood flowing into the head and causing death too quickly, they tied the body tightly with ropes and cords. The hands were tied behind the back, and the prisoner was lowered into the pit down to his belt or navel or even down to his knees and legs. The pit was then closed by two boards which were cut in such wise that they surrounded the body in the middle and let no light enter. In this fashion, they kept the man hanging upside down without food, poised between life and death and in doubt about the outcome, until the slowly rising blood pressure brought about complete exhaustion, or else hunger entirely sapped his physical strength. Or until, worn out by the torment, loneliness and solitude, he finally succumbed to this deadly torture and renounced his faith while there was still life left in him." "

This torture was used exclusively against Christians from this period onwards.

This torture rendered clear thinking and genuine moral decision quite impossible within a short time. The officials were anxious to exert the maximum psychological effect on the Christian faithful by publicizing the cases of these apostate priests.

Both psychological and moral pressure was added to the physical torments, and, especially when dealing with women and girls, the officials strove to break the prisoners' self-respect and reduce them to moral wrecks. Apostate priests were then forced to live with women, usually widows of executed criminals.

The list of the priests and religious who died in the pit is long and impressive, with the Japanese Jesuit Nicolas Keian Fukunaga was the first victim of this new torture. He suffered for three days before dying on July 1633. During the two following months, 36 priests, religious, and lay people were martyred in the pit and gave their life to Christ.

The Martyrs and an Apostate

On October 18, another outstanding group of arrested priests and religious were led to the pit at Nishizaka, Nagasaki, where the 26 martyrs had offered their lives by crucifixion in 1597. The band included Fr. Ferreira, Superior of the Jesuit mission; Antonio de Souza, the Superior of the Dominican friars; Julian Nakaura, Japanese Jesuit priest; the Japanese Brothers Pedro and Matteo, who had entered the Society of Jesus while lying in prison; and Francisco, who had become a Dominican friar in the same circumstances. All seven died as martyrs except for Ferreira.

After hanging in the pit for five painful hours, Christovão Ferreira gave in. He was pulled out of the pit and released from his bonds amid the exulting shouts of his persecutors, and the bitter tears of his own brethren. He was 53 years old at the time and had spent 37 years as a Jesuit.

Shocking News in Europe

The disturbing news of Ferreira's fall from grace arrived in Macao. The Jesuit visitor Palmeiro and other Jesuits in Macao started to offer special prayers and penances for the conversion of their fallen brother. Palmeiro died on 1635, because of the many fasts and scourgings he undertook after receiving the news about Fr. Ferreira. Most of the Jesuits in Macao wanted to go to Japan and were ready to give their lives for Ferreira so that he might reach the heights of martyrdom. Ferreira was dismissed from the Society of Jesus on 1636.

Publicity of Apostasy

Ferreira's apostasy under torture was the greatest success of Japan's anti-Christian policy. Apostatized priests served as living proof of the alleged evil of the forbidden religion. The government took advantage of this golden opportunity.

Soon after his apostasy Ferreira appears to have been summoned to Edo (today's Tokyo) for a short time and then returned to Nagasaki, where he spent the rest of his life.

Marriage of the Apostate

Officials then urged him to marry, or at least take a woman as his housekeeper. Their intention was to take advantage of Ferreira's psychological depression after his apostasy and, through this marriage, undercut his personality and self-esteem. The marriage helped cause adverse publicity, and the same strategy was later used against Giuseppe Chiara and his companions.

It seems that both Ferreira and the woman, who was supposedly the Japanese widow of a Chinese merchant, objected to the plan initially, but the Portuguese merchants who visited him in 1635 found the woman in his house. According to trustworthy testimony, Ferreira never had any intercourse with the woman to whom he was married and he testified that he kept her only to help around the house.

Life after Apostasy

Ferreira never persecuted Christians in any way, nor participated in other religious ceremony in any way. The city governor ordered a small house to be put at his disposal, where he could recover from the effects of torture. The house in which he lived was very poor and small.

When Ferreira asked the governors to give him something to eat, they replied:

“ The king of Japan will give you nothing, for you have apostatized out of pure weakness; and so far you have rendered no service, since you have betrayed neither the Fathers nor the Christians.” ”

He was known as Sawano Chūan, wore Japanese dress, lived in the Japanese way, and received from the government a small annuity for his living expenses. As a Japanese citizen he was obliged to belong to a family temple.

It is also sometimes asserted that Ferreira was the inventor of efumi, the treading on sacred pictures as a sign of rejecting Christianity. But this practice was not introduced by Ferreira, for it was most certainly in use before his apostasy.

The Portuguese and Chinese merchants who had met Ferreira in Nagasaki reported that he regretted his apostasy, preserved the Faith in his heart, secretly carried a rosary, recited the Gospel over sick people, and never betrayed the hiding places of the persecuted missionaries and Christians.

The Jesuit Mission to Save Ferreira: Marcello Mastrilli

There were three specific attempts to contact Ferreira and persuade him to renounce his apostasy. The first attempt was made by the Italian Jesuit Marcello Mastrilli (1603–1637).

On October 18, 1633, after hanging in the pit for five painful hours, Christovão Ferreira denied his God. That same year, far away from Asia and Japan, when taking out the splendid decorations for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception at Naples, a heavy beam chanced to fall upon the head of a Jesuit Priest, Fr. Marcello Mastrilli, then 30 years old. His father, the Marquis San Marzano, was a noble of Nola, and his mother, a Caracciolo, was also of the most illustrious Italian blood. This intelligent, virtuous, pious priest, was carried away bleeding and unconscious. Brain-fever and delirium succeeded. The doctor declared that his recovery was impossible. The Provincial, Father de Sangro, came to visit and bid him farewell. Fr Mastrilli was then anointed. On this evening he heard a voice calling to him: "Marcello! Marcello!"

He saw St. Francis Xavier in a pilgrim's dress, radiant and beautiful, saying: "You are cured. Kiss the wounds of your crucifix in thanksgiving," bidding him at the same time apply the relic of the true Cross to his neck, and consecrate himself entirely to his Lord, Who had stained that Cross with His Blood, and beg the grace to shed the last drop of his own blood for His Name.

The Saint then disappeared, and Father Mastrilli found himself cured. He got up, went to inform his Superior of the event, and said Mass next morning in thanksgiving without pain.

When the terrible news of Fr. Ferreira's apostasy reached Europe, Mastrilli, inspired by the intercession of St. Francis, petitioned to be sent to Japan. When he went for permission the General replied: "You need scarcely ask me for leave when St. Francis himself has given it to you."

Fr. Mastrilli hastened on to Macao and Manila, and finally reached Satsuma in Japan. The few timid Christians from Manila who had been examined by Japanese officers, soon betrayed his coming. After a brief search, Mastrilli was found praying in a thicket with his arms in the form of a cross, and much weakened by hunger. He said to them gently: "Come, my children, and take me." They then approached and bound his hands. Gagged and chained hand and foot on horseback, Fr. Mastrilli, was carried through Nagasaki, and plunged into the pit. There he remained alive for three days. The Governor finding that after repeated inspections that Fr. Mastrilli was still living and refusing to apostatize, ordered him to be beheaded.

At the third stroke of the blade, when his head fell, the air was darkened and the earth shook, and rocked to and fro, so that all the spectators were appalled. They hacked his body to pieces, burnt and crushed it into dust, which they cast into the air and into the river, so that not a relic might remain.

Fr. Mastrilli's apostolate in Japan was only to suffer and shed his blood, without preaching sermons, without baptizing converts, and without even offering Masses in Japan. But 16 years later, his sacrifice and that of other martyrs will obtain graces for Japan's persecuted Catholics.

The Second Attempt: Pedro Kibe

The second attempt was made by the Japanese Jesuit Blessed Pedro Kibe (Kasui).

Pedro Kibe walked to Rome from Goa, India, to become a Jesuit. While at Roman College in Rome, he witnessed the death of his classmate St. John Berchmans and that of St. Robert Bellarmine. He participated in Rome in the canonizations of St. Ignatius Loyola and of St. Francis Xavier. With his superior's permission, he left for Japan in 1623 to save the souls of his countrymen. When he arrived at Japan, he was already 43 years old. He worked in Nagasaki at first, then Kyoto, and Sendai until being arrested.

Condemned to death in the pit at Edo in July 1639, Kibe addressed a fervent speech to Ferreira on meeting with him in Edo and admonished him to repent.

Kibe endured the pit torture with two other Jesuits: Giovanni Battista Porro and Martinho Shikimi, who apostatized. The Japanese official records read: "Kibe Pedro did not renounce." Because he did not renounce the Faith, he was beheaded.

Third and Final Attempt

In 1638, after working in the Indian mission, Fr. Antonio Rubino was sent to Macao at his own request and was nominated Visitor in October 1639. In 1642, Rubino set out to Japan with a large group of missionaries, consisting of nine priests, one brother, and several catechists.

The expedition was divided into two groups in order to keep discretion. Rubino left for Japan with four priests on 1642, while the second group, under the leadership of Pedro Márquez, set out in 1643.

In August, Rubino and his companions' ship reached Japan and they were immediately apprehended and brought to Nagasaki. There they were closely interrogated, and then led to the prison at Ōmura. On March 1643, they were condemned to the pit torture and died. Three of them, who survived the torment for nine days, were pulled out of the pit and beheaded.

Appeal to a Brother Priest

Rubino had composed an appeal to Ferreira in Latin and intended to send it to him upon his arrival in Japan.

“ Are you that Christopher who in 1596, on the holy day of the birth of Christ, was born for God and the Society at the age of sixteen, and did you give her your name? Are you that Christopher who, forgetting parents, relatives and friends, and despising the things of this world, took the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience before the Provincial, Fr. Christovão Gouvea, in the college of Coimbra on the feast of the blessed proto-martyr Stephen in the year 1598? Have you followed in the footsteps of such a great martyr only to deny Christ, for whom that saint was stoned to death? Are you that Christopher who, on 4 April 1600, left the mother country and soil of Portugal and sailed to the East Indies to bring to that region the light of the Gospel? Have you brought that light there only to deny the true God? Are you that Christopher who, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, started from Goa on 1 May 1601 for the Japanese mission? Are you that Christopher who in the year 1608 at dawn on the same morning on which Jesus our Savior was born, celebrated your first holy sacrifice of the Mass? Have you misused those Holy Orders so that you may be dedicated to Satan? Are you that Christopher who, thirsting for the salvation of the souls of the Japanese, boarded ship on May 16, 1609 and sailed for Japan? Have you really brought them salvation, or have you through your bad example misled many from the true path? Are you that Christopher who joyfully pronounced the four solemn vows before the Provincial, Fr. Matheus de Couros, on October 1, 1617 at Nagasaki? Should you not have preserved this loyalty which was vowed to God and the Society in the presence of so many witnesses? Should you not have remembered what we have so solemnly promised and to whom? Are you that Christopher to whom our Society committed with great confidence the leadership of the whole Japanese province and the duties of bishop on December 23, 1632? Have you administered it only that you may turn your back on Christ and his Order? What a terrible change! How you have degraded yourself! I perish with tears and sighs when I think on this.” ”

Other Apostates

In June 1643 the Second Rubino Group, consisting of the Italian Jesuits Pedro Márquez, Alonso Arroyo, Francisco Cassola, Giuseppe Chiara, and six companions, landed on Ōshima in Chikuzen and were immediately arrested.

In Nagasaki, Marquez was subjected to water torture. There were several types of water torture in use including forcing the victim to swallow great amounts of water with a funnel and then beating his belly with bamboo rods. Marquez managed to survive this torture.

By order of the government, all four priests were sent to Edo on July 27 for inquisition. The prisoners reached Edo on August 27. There they were frequently questioned by the supreme court and even by the shogun, Iemitsu, himself. Ferreira was present as an interpreter at the trial. He was ordered to go to Edo from Nagasaki to be the interpreter for these proceedings.

The priests were condemned to the torture of the pit, where, according to the report of the inquisitor, they all apostatized. They were then allowed to live in Japan under confinement in a “Christian house” and given Japanese names. (The location of this infamous “Christian house” (Kirishitan Yashiki) is near the SSPX Mass center in Tokyo.)

Giuseppe Chiara's last name was changed to Okamoto, and he was given a Japanese wife. We know that Chiara remained at the “Christian house” for 40 years until his death in 1685. (This Fr. Chiara is the model for Fr. Sebastian Rodrigues in Endo's aforementioned novel *Silence*).

Dutch Relation

If we believe *Atlas Japannensis* written by Arnoldus Montanus (1625–1683) a Dutch Protestant writer who never came to Japan and only collected the news from the Dutch, the Jesuit priests

“ though they had apostatized from the Christian Faith, yet declared publicly to the Interpreters that they did not freely apostatize; but the insufferable torments which had been inflicted upon them, had forced them to it. The Council asked them at large concerning their opinions, and the power of God; on which one answered faintly, but the rest were much more resolute. The Japan Council not well experienced in the Romish Religion, wanted questions to ask them, and therefore called for Syovan [Ferreira], the Apostate Priest, who was there ready for that purpose. So soon as he saw the Jesuits, he looked very fiercely upon them, notwithstanding he had formerly been one of their Order.” ”

Then follow reproaches to the missionaries for misleading the Japanese people with their religion, accusations of bringing them under the Spanish Empire and of provoking the deaths of thousands of Japanese. Then, after a long theological discourse about the idols of the pagans and Buddhism, Montanus closes his account of the interrogation as follows:

“ To these blasphemous discourses the wisest of the Jesuits said notwithstanding these words come from Syovan, yet they ought to be reprov'd; and I tell you, that we believe, that without God's permission none can hurt one hair of our heads, neither is there salvation for the immortal soul without God; and to forsake him, either for worldly ends, or cruel torments, must upon necessity be a great sin: meanwhile God denies not mercy to those, that in the last hour beg it, if they are penitent, and depend on their Savior Jesus Christ. It seem'd as if the Jesuit would have said more, but that the Councillors Sackay Sammoccysama, and Matsodairo Ysosamma gave a sign that the four Jesuits should be led from thence. Afterwards the Dutch heard that two of the Jesuits had retracted their apostasy and had refused to join a Buddhist sect.” ”

The Death of a Martyr?

In 1652, news about Ferreira reached the outside world. It was said that he had recanted and had been condemned to death in the pit as a result. Fr. Joseph Franz Schütte, S.J. (1906–1981) made a critical investigation about Ferreira's martyrdom using original European documents preserved in Rome. He is inclined to believe that the substance the reports are trustworthy and he summarizes the various accounts of Fr. Ferreira's death as follows:

“ Fr. Ferreira was already more than 80 years old, and for years had been confined to bed by sickness and weakness. A great change took place in his soul and his deed now appeared to him in a completely different light. He abhorred his action as a cowardly betrayal of God and expressed his inner convictions in a loud voice. His neighbors heard him talking and finally informed the soldiers of the governor. They visited the house of the sick tsūya and asked him the reason for his grief. The Father explained to them with all frankness and firmness his sorrow and his inner conversion. The soldiers joked and made fun of him, saying that he was out of his mind, but he contradicted them firmly. On the contrary, he showed himself ready to die for his faith. The soldiers then reported this to the governor, who hesitated for a while but, after he had ascertained the facts, condemned Christovão to death in the pit. The sentence, however, was to be carried out in all secrecy so as to avoid causing excitement in the city. The soldiers returned to Ferreira's house, and seeing that he remained constant in his intention, they dragged him off to the torture of the pit. However, they were not able to prevent many Japanese, both Christian and non-Christian, as well as non-Christian Chinese, from attending the martyrdom. The soldiers bound Ferreira and hanged him head downward into the pit. With this torture Ferreira ended his life courageously for Christ.” ”

Some scholars consider this second-hand account optimistic and remark that the martyrdom of Fr. Ferreira is reported neither in the Dutch sources nor in the Japanese records, although his name can be found in the death registers of the Zen temples in Nagasaki. This silence is not proof against martyrdom. The government would never have recognized a retraction of his apostasy and might well have tried to cover the matter up.

A Final World

Regardless of how Fr. Ferreira chose to leave the world, what should be central to this recollection are the heroic attempts of his fellow Jesuits to save his soul when news of his apostasy spread throughout East Asia and Western Europe. Not content to see anyone lost, Ferreira's compatriots sought him as the lost sheep in the hopes of bringing him yet again into Christ's fold. Although many Japanese Catholics and missionaries succumbed to apostasy after enduring unimaginable tortures, many more persevered in the Faith through the prayers and sacrifices of fellow Catholics. May their heroic witness, and the prayers they now offer before the Throne of Christ in Heaven, sustain us today and preserve us from all temptations to renounce Our Lord.

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