

3996

# LA CIVILTÀ CATTOLICA

«Silence».

Interview with Martin Scorsese



«SILENCE»  
Interview with Martin Scorsese

Antonio Spadaro S.I.

It was March 3<sup>rd</sup> when I rang the doorbell at the Scorsese home in New York. It was a cold day but bright. It was 1 p.m. I was welcomed into the kitchen, like in a family. I was asked if I wanted a good cup of coffee. «Italiano», precisely. I accept. I was cold. I arrived at the Scorsese home a bit early and had preferred to wait circling the block. The idea of a warm cup of coffee—and Italian—appealed to me. To welcome me in the living room is Martin's wife, Helen. I have a strong sensation of home. We speak at length before the arrival of her husband. I offer her a book, *Dear Pope Francis*, the volume that collects the questions of 30 children from all over the world to the Pope and his answers. I tell her about the project and how we did it. Helen admires the pages, leafing through the book. She gets lost among the drawings. I watch her. We are seated on the same sofa. She talks to me about her husband, her seventeen year old daughter, the film. I understand that *Silence* is a family work, in a sense that it involved the whole family.

At a certain point Martin arrives with a quick step and with a welcoming smile. Our conversation, before moving to the film, focuses on our common roots. We are in some way «paesani», fellow countrymen. He already knows I am from Messina. He tells me that he is from Polizzi Generosa. Or better: it was his father. But it is clear his roots are there. Polizzi Generosa that gave birth to Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, a man of thought, literature and politics; to Cardinal Mariano Rampolla del Tindaro, Secretary of State for Leo XIII and almost elected Pontiff; he shares family roots with Vincent Schiavelli, Domenico Dolce and Michele Serra.

But we do not recall these illustrious fellow countrymen. We recall, however, his life as the son of an immigrant in the neighborhoods of New York, his life as an altar boy. Out of it comes a mixture of ties of blood, violence and the sacred. Memories as an altar boy in church merge with those of the kid who, unaware, makes the street his first film set: that of his imagination and of his dreams. Ours is a friendly conversation that I now regret not having recorded. But, that so, I have preserved in its nature the spontaneous dialogue. Thus I understand how for Scorsese the violent and the sacred have a distant root. For him religion is not from the angels, but from men. Grace triumphs in what he says. And his eyes reveal it in flashes. «I am surrounded by a form of grace» he tells me with a smile. And he looks at his wife. But the grace he talks to me about would be totally incomprehensible without the dust and shadows. He shows me some photos of the film. They are very beautiful.

So, we start the conversation on *Silence*. The questions and the answer hints come out. Here started a laboratory that went on for eight months with the exchange of email and his recordings out loud then faithfully transcribed by an assistant. This more than an interview was an examination of conscience, a laboratory of meaning. And this thanks to him. I realize I'm a pretext, an enzyme. I ask myself if in my priest collar Martin Scorsese has not recognized the father Principe who he talks about in the interview. I leave the Scorsese home at 3:30 in the afternoon, and outside it is less cold than when I entered. I walk on foot alongside Central Park to return home.

I meet Mr. Scorsese again November 25<sup>th</sup> in Rome. It is about 5 in the afternoon. I arrive at his hotel early and I enjoy a sunset in the sky that seems painted by an impressionist. I enter the hotel just a few seconds before Helen who is returning. When I see her, I have like the impression of never having left. We sit down to have a cup of tea. I have it, actually: she has a glass of water. We talk and I almost forget I am here for her husband. «He is coming» she tells me. And I: «Who?». I get up and go to meet Mr. Scorsese who comes as always with his dark suit but without his glasses, which he holds in his hand. His grip is as warm as his smile. We sit down and with him arrive bread, breadstick, oil, salt and treats and his American coffee with milk. We all eat something. We resume

the conversation seated at a table set at an angle to the elegant but sober room put at our disposal. Our conversation is three way. But it always starts from the family, the daughter on the way, of the fact that *Silence* was truly a family film as I had understood. We resume the conversation on grace. I tell him he should read the stories of Flannery O'Connor if he hasn't already read them. I tell him that I was on her farm in Milledgeville three times to get inside her stories. She has always seen grace in the «territory of the devil». I learned to see it myself. He smiles and tells me that even Paul Elie, who had interviewed him for the *New York Times*, had advised him to read O'Connor. I know Paul well and it did not surprise me that he had the same impression. Mr. Scorsese continues telling me he had now read *The Violent Bear It* and was shocked. He found himself immediately within the story. «And then the language!» he exclaims. Yet: it is the language of the deep south of the United States and it is like a knife that seeks a wound to find there its sheath. I tell him that he has to continue. Maybe something will arise. And that he had to read the letters, *The Habit of Being*: this is the title of their collection.

But then he tells me that he had an operation on his eyes that was done in Indianapolis. And that then he had to spend a long time without being able to read. So then he got audiobooks and listened to Dostoevsky as much as he could. He tells me about Karamazov. And of how he had enjoyed and struggled with his imagination while listening. I tell him that Pope Francis loves Dostoevsky as well. «Interesting», he says. «And what does he like in particular?», he asks me. I told him that I was surprised when Bergoglio told me, but the dearest novel for him is *Notes from the Underground*. He has a start. «But it is also mine!», he exclaims. «*Taxi Driver* is my *Notes from the Underground!*». We talk about the importance of drama, about dramatic novels, about those that mirror life and not ideas. Discernment is not done with ideas. I didn't tell him that the Pope said that same phrase to me in the interview of 2013. But I remain profoundly struck. There is a literary intelligence that shapes both the life of a director and the life of a pope. But all in all, there is nothing surprising here, actually. We return to his memories of the street. He tells me that he learned to see from the street. And shooting film he

continues to see. «Even this is a grace», he says to me. «Yes—I answer him—being touched by grace means seeing things in a certain way, in a different way». «Miracles happen, but at times, miracles are facts of life, but whoever receives the miracle is able to decipher them well, to see them with the right eyes», he said. And we need to train our eyes, therefore, for years, sometimes for decades...

*How did you have in mind the project of Silence? I know that it is a «passion project» and that you have had it in mind for some years... maybe for 20 or even 30 years....*

I was given Shusaku Endo's novel in 1988. I finished reading it in August of 1989 on the bullet train from Tokyo to Kyoto, after I'd completed my scenes as Van Gogh in Akira Kurosawa's *Dreams*. I can't say whether or not I was actually interested in making a film out of it at that point. The story was so disturbing, so profound to me, that I didn't know if I could ever even attempt to approach it. But, over time, something in me that kept saying: «You have to try.» We obtained the rights around 1990/91. About a year later, my friend and writing collaborator Jay Cocks and I tried to write a draft. But really, I wasn't just wasn't ready. But that was the beginning of a long process that led to the first real draft of the script in December of 2006—that was when we came up with a real structure for a *movie*. During all those years, I really did not, in any way, ever imagine that I would make the picture. It would have felt...presumptuous of me. I didn't know how to deal with the themes. In addition to that, it was extremely difficult to actually get the project put together once we had the draft. So many legal and financial issues arose over the years that the whole situation gradually developed into a kind of Gordian knot, and it took many people and a lot of time to sort it all out. Then, there was the problem of actors. I'd find actors I liked and who were «bankable,» they agreed to do the picture, and then time would pass and they were either no longer «bankable» or they were too old, or both. Actors who guaranteed a certain amount of money necessary to make the picture, and actors who wanted to actually play the roles. A very, very long process—19 years, to be exact—with many stops and starts.

Looking back, I think that this long gestation process became a way of *living with* the story, and living life—my *own* life—around it. Around the ideas in the book. And I was provoked, by those ideas, to think further about the question of faith. I look back and I see it all coming together in my memory as a kind of pilgrimage—that’s the way it felt. It’s amazing to me, to have received the grace to be able to make the film now, at this point in my life.

*How has the desire to make this film been working in you? Was it an idea to realize in the future or has the desire to make it in some way inspired your work in these years?*

Well, as I said: it’s been *with* me, I’ve lived with it. So it’s informed everything I’ve done, I think. Choices I’ve made. Ways of approaching certain ideas and scenes in other pictures I’ve made over those years. In other words, there was the desire to make the actual film on the one hand; and on the other hand, the presence of the Endo novel, the story, as a kind of spur to thinking about faith; about life and how it’s lived, about grace and how it’s received, about how they can be the same in the end, I think...which, in turn, gave me a greater strength and clarity in my approach to the concrete task of making the picture.

*For you believing in God and being a Catholic are two distinct things. Did I understand that correctly? What do you mean by that?*

Well, I’m interested in how people perceive God, or, I should say, how they perceive the world of the intangible. There are many pathways, and I think that the one you choose depends on what culture you’re a part of. My way has been, and is, Catholicism. After many years of thinking about other things, dabbling here and there, I am most comfortable as a Catholic. I believe in the *tenets* of Catholicism. I’m not a doctor of the church. I’m not a theologian who could argue the Trinity. I’m certainly not interested in the politics of the institution. But the idea of the Resurrection, the idea of the Incarnation, the powerful message of compassion and love—that’s the key. The sacraments, if you are allowed to take them, to *experience* them, help you stay close to God.

Now, I realize that this begs the question: am I a practicing Catholic? If that means «Are you a regular churchgoer?» then the answer is no. But then, at an early age I came to believe that practicing is not something that happens only in a consecrated building during certain rituals performed at a certain time of day. Practicing is something that happens outside, all the time. Practicing, really, is *everything* you do, good or bad, and reflecting on it. That's the struggle. However, the comfort and the profound impression of Catholicism at a very early age...I'll say that it's something that I've always related *back* to.

*In any case, this film of yours, the choice of a novel like Silence, seems to go to the roots of Christian spirituality and the Catholic imagination. A Bernanos-made film, in a certain sense. What do you think?*

6

I agree that it goes to the roots of Christian spirituality, but I'm not sure that I agree about the comparison with Bernanos. For me, it comes down to the question of grace. Grace is something that happens throughout life. It comes at unexpected moments. Now, I'm saying that as someone who has never been through war, or torture, or occupation. I've never been tested in that way. Of course, there were those people who *were* tested, like Jacques Lusseyran, the blind French resistance leader who was sent to Buchenwald and kept the spirit of resistance alive for his fellow prisoners—in fact, we've been trying for many years to make a film based on his memoir, ...*And There Was Light*. There's Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi were able to find a way to helping others. I'm not saying that their examples provide some kind of definitive answer to the question of where God was when so many millions of people were systematically slaughtered. But they existed, they performed acts of tremendous courage and compassion, and we remember them as lights in the darkness.

You can't see through someone else's experience, only your own. So, it might seem paradoxical, but I related to the novel by Endo, who was Japanese, in a way that I never have to Bernanos. There's something so hard, so unrelentingly harsh in Bernanos. Whereas in Endo, tenderness and compassion are always there. Always. Even

when the characters don't know that tenderness and compassion are there, *we* do.

*Who is God for you? Is he the object of punishment and perplexity or source of joy and harmony? Pope Francis speaks of God as Mercy. He wants to get rid of and repudiate any image of God as a torturer. ... Can God ever be a torturer?*

This brings me back to Bernanos, by way of Robert Bresson and his adaptation of *Diary of a Country Priest*. I saw the film for the first time in the mid-60s. I was in my early 20s, and I was growing up, moving beyond the idea of Catholicism that I'd held as a child. Like many children, I was overwhelmed and deeply impressed by the severe side of God as he was presented to us—the God that punishes you when you do something bad, the God of storms and lightning. This is what Joyce was dealing with in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which also had a profound effect on me at that time.

It was an extremely dramatic moment in the country, of course. Vietnam was escalating, and it had just been declared a «holy war.» So for me and for many others, there was a lot of confusion and doubt and sadness that was just *there*, part of the reality of day to day life. It was at that time that I saw Bresson's film of *Diary of a Country Priest*, and it gave me hope. Every character in that picture, with the possible exception of the older priest, is suffering. Every character is feeling punished and most of them are inflicting punishment on each other. And at one point, the priest has an exchange with one of his parishioners, and he says to her: «God is not a torturer. He just wants us to be merciful with ourselves.» And that opened something up for me. That was the key. Because even though we *feel* that God is punishing and torturing us, if we're able to give ourselves the time and space to reflect on it, we realize that *we're* the ones doing the torturing, and *we're* the ones we have to be merciful with. I got to meet Bresson once in Paris, and I told him just what the picture meant to me.

After I made *Raging Bull*, I came to realize that this was what we had made looked at—this was what the film was about. We didn't go into that picture with a theme in mind, we just tried to make a film about someone that led a kind of life that we knew,

in a world that we knew. Jake is punishing everyone around him, but the one he's really punishing is himself. So at the end, when he looks in the mirror, he sees that he has to be merciful with himself. Or, to put it another way, he has to accept himself, and live with himself. And then, maybe it will become easier for him to live with other people, and to receive *their* goodness.

When I was young, I was extraordinarily lucky, because I had a remarkable priest, Father Principe. I learned so much from him, and that includes mercy with oneself and with others. Of course, he sometimes played the role of the stern moral instructor—His example was something else again. This man was a real *guide*. He could talk tough, but he never actually *forced* you to do anything—he *guided* you. Advised you. *Cajoled* you. He had such extraordinary love.

8

*A critic has spoken about «Scorsese's obsession with the spiritual». Do you agree with the fact that you are «obsessed» with the spiritual dimension of life?*

There's something that Marilynne Robinson wrote in her book *Absence of Mind* that gets right to the heart of this question for me: «The givens of our nature—that we are brilliantly creative and as brilliantly destructive, for example—persist as facts to be dealt with even if the word 'primate' were taken to describe us exhaustively.» Of course she's right. The idea that everything can be scientifically explained doesn't seem ridiculous to me, but actually quite naïve. When you settle your mind to consider the great, overwhelming *mystery* of just being here, of living and dying, the very idea of getting to the bottom of it all by means of science just seems beside the point. This is what Robinson writes about in her essays and in her novels. And what she calls «mind and soul» is, for me, true Catholicism. Mind and soul is really everything that you do—the good that you do and the damage that you do. It's the *trying*, with others in general and with loved ones in particular. And my own particular struggle has been trying to get through my absorption in my work, my *self*-absorption, in order to be present for the people I love. Because I express all of this—everything we're discussing—in cinema. Living in the world of notoriety and fame and ambition and competition is another struggle for me. But, of course, even

when you're part of that world—I have to admit that I am, to a certain extent, and I've even made a few films about it—the spiritual dimension of life, as you call it, is always right there. Carl Jung had a Latin inscription carved over the doorway to his house in Switzerland: «Vocatus atque non vocatus deus aderit.» Called or not called, God will come. That says it all.

*You have suffered from asthma. Pope Francis also has a problem with his lungs. When you are short of breath, it seems to me, you become more sensitive. Have you learned something from this shortness of breath?*

The first thing to say about asthma is that when it's severe, you really feel like you can't catch your breath. Quite literally, you feel like you could pass away, like you're actually *making* a passage. There were times when there was just no way to breathe, and the wheezing was so strong and my lungs were so congested that I started wondering: if this is the way it's going to be from now on, how can I continue? That *does* go through your mind: you just want some peace.

Now, when I was young, back in the 50s, there was a certain way of dealing with doctors, at least for people like my parents. You believed whatever the doctor said, you never went to get a second opinion—and even if they'd wanted to seek out a second opinion, they probably couldn't have afforded one. And the doctors had a certain way of dealing with asthma. There were certain drugs and treatments, but more importantly there was the dictation of a certain lifestyle. You could not play any sports. You could not exert yourself. They even warned about excessive laughter. And, I was allergic to everything around me—animals, trees, grass—so I couldn't go to the country.

So, all of this meant that I lived a life apart—I felt separate from everyone else. It also meant that I spent a lot more time with the adults, and it gave me an awareness and, I think, a heightened understanding of the adult world. I had an awareness of the rhythm of life, the concerns of the adults, the discussions of what's right and what's wrong, of one person's obligation to another, and so on. It made me more *aware*: more aware of how people were feeling, more aware of their body language—again, the difference between words

and actions—more aware of their sensitivity, which in turn led to me cultivating my own sensitivity. I became sharpened, I think.

And, looking at the world from my window... the memory of looking down on the street and seeing so much, some of it beautiful and some of it horrifying and some of it beyond description, is central for me.

The other side of it is a kind of intensity of focus when I'm at work, staying fixed on what's important. I think that my separateness, my solitude, and my awareness led to a determination *and* an ability to shut out everything extraneous...which is what happens when I make a film. It's paradoxical, because it's a concentration that *protects* a sensitivity which results in a kind of *insensitivity*.

10

*You have claimed of having lived on the edge of destruction, of having almost hit bottom. What is salvation for you?*

There's a deception in self-destruction: that in order to understand destruction, you have to destroy yourself. And then it somehow becomes a kind of arrogance, a pride...and then, you've destroyed yourself. In my case, I came out of a self-destructive moment in my life, somehow — I got there naively and came out of it just as naively, I suppose.

I was an altar boy and I served at funerals and at the Saturday Solemn High Mass for the dead. I also had a friend whose father was an undertaker. I saw the older generation that came over from Sicily at the turn of the century die away, and that was a profound experience for me. So I thought a lot about mortality — just not your own. And at a certain point, I did quite a bit of damage to myself. And then I came out of it, and the first picture I made after that was *Raging Bull*.

So the other side of this question is something we already talked about in relation to that picture. Accepting yourself, living with yourself, possibly becoming a force for something positive in people's lives. I suppose that's one way of defining salvation. It comes down to the people you love: your family, your friends, your *loved ones*. You try to be as good as you can, and as reasonable and compassionate as you can.

But along the way, you also learn something else. In *Ride the High Country* by Sam Peckinpah, there's a scene where Edgar

Buchanan, a drunken minister, is marrying Mariette Hartley's character to this man, and he says, «You've got to understand something about marriage — *people change*.» The same thing goes for every relationship. It goes for collaborations. Over time, people you know *very* well and that you've worked with for a very long time might have other needs, other things that become important to them, and you have to recognize that and make due. You accept who they are, you accept how they've changed, you try to nurture what's best. And sometimes, you have to recognize that they have to go find their own way. There was a time when I considered that a betrayal. But then I realized that it wasn't. It was just change.

The word «salvation» is interesting. Because it's something that one can never know. At the moment of your death, if you're conscious, do you know if you've reached salvation? *How* do you know? And you certainly can't know while you're living life. The only thing you *can* do is to live as decent a life as you can. If you fall, you have to pick yourself up and try again—a cliché, but it's true. For me, day and night, there are peaks and valleys, constant exhilaration and darkness, a doubting that becomes self-criticism. But you can't overdo that because, again, you have to accept yourself. So it's an ongoing process.

*After Raging Bull you thought of going to Rome and to travel to shoot documentaries on the lives of the saints. Is that so? Why did this idea come to mind?*

Yes, that's true. In 1980 or 1981, I had just made *Raging Bull* and I literally thought it would be my last film. And at the time, because of the films that Bertolucci and the Tavianis and others had made for RAI, and in particular Roberto Rossellini's historical films, I thought that television was the future of cinema. Or, I should say: television *mixed* with cinema. Something entertaining, but with more depth to the element of entertainment. But also films that could *teach* in some way. Again, this comes from the inspiration of Rossellini. He actually referred to those pictures as «didactic films.» So I thought RAI was going to be a place where I could explore a question that has always obsessed me: what is a saint? My idea was to make a series of films about different saints, some

of them saints that might not even have existed, who might have been figures of folklore. But where did those figures come from? That takes us back to pre-Judeo-Christian times. Why the need for that kind of intercession? Why St. Christopher, the patron saint of traveling, who, it turns out, did not exist? When one travels, one is in danger, so there's a need for something or someone to protect us. But then, what about the *real* saints? How do they relate to people, in general and spiritually? What is their day-to-day life like? What does it consist of? This goes back to a book that Father Principe gave us, about a modern day Saint Francis, called *Mr. Blue* by Myles Connolly, who wrote and produced for cinema and TV. He tried to show that you *can* live a good life, not in the material sense but a life of decency, in the modern world. Like with Dorothy Day, and what she did at the Catholic Worker. Father Principe invited her down to a communion breakfast to talk for a small group of elders. I just got a glimpse of her as she was leaving.

So these things were developing for me as I made *Raging Bull*, which, as I said, I meant to be a sign-off from big-budget studio moviemaking. There was a film that was also quite influential for me at the time, also by Rossellini: *Europa '51*, which I saw in a cut version. Rossellini dealt with this question of being a saint in the modern world. You have these figures like Francis, Catherine, Thérèse—Alain Cavalier made a film about her. They weren't what I would call *activist* saints, and they were *extremely* different from someone like Padre Pio, for instance. The real essence of it—compassion, love, living a life in imitation of Christ—and the question of how to live such a life in the modern world—is something that Rossellini dealt with in this picture. And I didn't know at the time that he was inspired by Simone Weil, who, by the way, was *not* merciful with herself. At the end of *Europa '51*, the character of Irene finds a great peace with herself, and she finds herself of great use. So that picture was enormously important for me. So was his *Flowers of St. Francis*, which is the most beautiful film I've ever seen about being a saint.

As it happened, things went differently. I went back to New York and made another picture with Robert De Niro, *The King of Comedy*. Then, I tried to make *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and it

fell apart. The industry had changed, and it didn't seem possible to make these pictures, these *studies*, of the lives of the saints. But I never lost my interest in characters who tried to live their lives in imitation of Christ, and I knew that I would return to that one day. A lot of that energy and those discussions went into *Last Temptation* when we finally got to make it a few years later. And, of course, it's continued and developed, as I said, over the years that I've lived with *Silence*.

*Who is the character that intrigues you the most from the novel «Silence» by Endo and in your film? Why?*

When I was younger, I was thinking of making a film about *being* a priest. I myself wanted to follow in Father Principe's footsteps, so to speak, and be a priest. I went to a preparatory seminary but I failed out the first year. And I realized, at the age of 15, that a vocation is something very special, that you can't acquire it, and you can't have one just because you want to be like somebody else. You have to have a true calling.

Now, if you *do* have the calling, how do you deal with your own pride? If you're able to perform a ritual in which transubstantiation is enacted, then yes—you're very special. However, you have to have something else as well. Based on what I saw and experienced, a good priest, in addition to having that talent, that ability, always has to think of his parishioners first. So the question is: how does that priest get past his ego? His pride? I wanted to make that film. And I realized that with *Silence*, almost 60 years later, I *was* making that film. Rodrigues is struggling directly with that question.

But I think that the most fascinating and intriguing of all the characters is Kichijiro. At times, when we were making the picture, I thought, «Maybe he's Jesus, too.» In Matthew, Jesus says: «Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.» You cross paths with the person in the street who repels you—that's Jesus. Of course, Kichijiro is *constantly* weakening, and constantly causing damage to himself and to *many* others, including his family. But then, at the end, who's there with Rodrigues? Kichijiro. He was, it turns out, Rodrigues's great teacher. His mentor. His guru, so to speak. That's why Rodrigues thanks him at the end.

And of course, in terms of my own pictures, people have pointed out to me that Kichijiro is Johnny Boy in *Mean Streets*. The character of Charlie, played by Harvey Keitel, has to get through *his* pride. He understands that spirituality and practice is not limited to the actual edifice of the literal church, that it has to be outside on the street. But then, of course, you can't choose your own penance. He thinks he can, but penance comes when you least expect it, from a quarter that you can never anticipate. This is why Johnny Boy and Kichijiro fascinate me. They become the venue for destruction or salvation. A lot of this comes from what I observed when I was young, specifically what went on between my father, who was named Charlie, and his brother Joe.

14

*Are Father Rodrigues and Father Ferreira two faces of the same coin or are they two different, incomparable coins?*

We don't know what the historical Father Ferreira did or didn't believe, but in the Endo novel it would seem that he actually lost his faith. Maybe another way of looking at it is that he couldn't get over the shame of renouncing his faith, even if he did it to save lives.

Rodrigues, on the other hand, is someone who renounces his faith and thereby regains it. That's the paradox. To put it simply, Rodrigues hears Jesus speak to him and Ferreira doesn't, and that's the difference.

*One time you, recalling your father, said that when he told you something there was always a moral implication: who is wrong? who is right? The good guys on one side, the bad guys on the other. Here who are the good guys? Who are the bad guys? Are there good guys and bad guys in the world?*

Both of my parents came from big families. My father had four brothers, and Joe was the youngest. He lived below us on Elizabeth Street with his wife and kids. My grandparents—my father's parents—lived two doors down, and every night my father would go there to see them. They would discuss family matters, the honor or the Scorsese name, the kind of thing I just didn't understand—these were old world matters, and I was born here. They were decent people, trying to live a decent life. Now, organized crime

was present in this world, so people had to walk a tightrope—you couldn't be with them but you couldn't be against them either. My uncle tended to be *with* them. He was always smalltime, just like Johnny Boy—always in trouble, went to jail a number of times, always owed money to loan sharks. There was always a sense of violence present. So, my father took it upon himself. Every day, in that apartment, I could see my father experiencing this: How to deal with his brother in a way that was right and just. He took it all on himself. My mother would get very frustrated at times, and she would say, «Can't your brothers help?» They had, to a certain extent, they had all moved out of the neighborhood. My father and Joe were the only ones left. So my father dealt with it all himself. And that meant dealing with everyone, on all sides: reasoning, negotiating, making deals, making sure he didn't get taken out, sometimes giving him money. He really put himself on the line for my uncle. And it was always about obligation: the obligation to take care of his brother. Some of the other family members gave up, some moved away, so it was all on us. And it was very, very tough. I loved Joe, but it was very tough with him. It really raises the question: am I my brother's keeper? This what I was dealing with in *Mean Streets*.

*«Silence» seems to be the story of a profound discovery of the face of Christ, a Christ who seems to be asking of Rodrigues to trample on him for the salvation of other men because that is why he came into the world. . . . What is the face of Christ for you? Is it that «fumie», the icon trampled on such as Endo described? Or is it the glorious Christ of majesty?*

I chose the face of Christ painted by El Greco, because I thought it was more compassionate than the one painted by Piero della Francesca. When I was growing up, the face of Christ was something that was always a comfort, and a joy.

*Setting aside «The Last Temptation of Christ», in your opinion, which film in the history of cinema best portrays the real face of Christ?*

The best film about Christ, for me, is Pasolini's *Vangelo secondo Matteo*. When I was young, I wanted to do a contemporary version

of the story of Christ set in the tenements and on the streets of downtown New York. But when I saw the Pasolini film I realized that it had already been done.

*Was there a situation in which instead you felt God was close, even if silent?*

When I was young, and serving Mass, there was no doubt that there was a sense of the sacred. I tried to convey this in *Silence*, during the scene of the Mass in the farmhouse in Goto. At any rate, I remember going out on the street after the Mass was over and wondering: how can life just be going on? Why hasn't everything changed? Why isn't the world directly affected by the body and blood of Christ? That's the way that I experienced the presence of God when I was very young.

In 1983, I was in Israel scouting locations for *Last Temptation*. I was flying around the country in small single engine planes. I don't like to fly at all, particularly in small planes. So I was holding onto these small religious items things that my mother had given me years earlier. I was rigid, very tense. I was going back and forth from Tel Aviv to Galilee to Bethesda to Elat. And at one point I was taken into the church of the Holy Sepulchre. I was there with the producer, Robert Chartoff, who passed away recently. I was there at the tomb of Christ. I knelt, said a prayer. I came out, and Bob asked me if I felt anything different. I said that I really didn't, I was just overwhelmed by the geography of the place, and by all the religious orders that had staked a claim there. So, then we had to fly back to Tel Aviv. I got on the plane. Again, I was very rigid, and I was clutching all of these religious items from my mother in my hand. And suddenly, as we were flying, I realized that I didn't feel the need for it anymore. I just felt an all-encompassing kind of love, and a sense that if anything were going to happen it wasn't going to happen then. It was extraordinary. And I feel lucky enough to have experienced that once in my life.

I also want to talk about the birth of my daughter Francesca. She was delivered by Caesarian. I was there, watching everything as it happened. And then, suddenly, I was told to leave. I was taken into another room and I watched through a rectangular window.

I saw a lot of urgent, even frantic activity, until what looked to me like a lifeless body came out. Then the nurse came out, crying, and she said, «She's going to make it.» And she embraced me. I didn't know whether she was talking about my wife or the baby. Then the doctor came out. He stood against the wall, and then slid down, crouched, and said, «You can plan and plan, and then there's that 20 seconds of terror. But we made it.» They had almost lost both of them. And the next thing I knew, they placed this little bundle in my hands. I looked at her face, and she opened her eyes. Everything turned in an instant.

It reminds me of that extraordinary passage in Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Gilead*, which I read when we were making *Silence*. The dying minister is describing the wonder that he felt when he saw his daughter's face for the first time. «Now that I am about to leave this world,» he says, «I realize that there is nothing more astonishing than a human face. It has something to do with incarnation. You feel your obligation to a child when you have seen it and held it. Any human face has a claim on you. Because you can't help but understand the singularity of it, the courage and the loneliness of it. But this is truest of the face of an infant. I consider that to be one kind of vision, as mystical as any.» I can say, from personal experience, that this is absolutely true.

*Is compassion instinct or love?*

I think the key is the denial of the self. The trap that Charlie falls into in *Mean Streets* is the trap of thinking that his care for Johnny Boy can be his penance, for his own redemption, his own spiritual use. Again, this gets back to the question of the good priests I knew always put their egos aside. Once you do that, there's only need—the needs of others—and questions of choosing penance or what compassion is or isn't fall away. They become meaningless.

*In the story of «Silence», there is a lot of physical and psychological violence. What is in the representation of the violence? In your films there is a lot of it. What is specific about the violence in this film?*

Well, to refer to your earlier question, I am obsessed by the spiritual. I'm obsessed by the question of what we are. And that

means *looking* at us closely, the good and the bad. Can we nurture the good so that at some future point in the evolution of mankind, violence will, possibly, cease to exist? But right now, violence is here. It's something that we do. It's important to show that. So that one doesn't make the mistake of thinking that violence is something that others do — that «violent people» do. «I could never do that, of course.» Well, actually, you *could*. We can't *deny* it. So there are people who are shocked by their own violence, or thrilled by it. It's a real form of expression, under desperate circumstances, and it's not funny. Some people say that *Good Fellas* is funny. The *people* are funny, the violence isn't. A lot of people just don't understand violence, because they come from cultures or actually subcultures from which it's very distant. But I grew up in a place where it was a part of life, and where it was very close to me.

18

Back in the early 70s, we were coming out of the Vietnam era and the end of the decorum of old Hollywood. With *Bonnie and Clyde* and then, really, with *The Wild Bunch*, everything opened up. Those were the pictures that spoke to us, not necessarily in a pleasant way. Violence is, for me, a part of being human. The humor in my pictures is from the people and their reasoning, or their lack thereof. Violence, and the profanity of life. Earthiness, if you want to be polite about it. Profanity and obscenity exist, which means that they're part of human nature. It doesn't mean that therefore we are *inherently* obscene and profane — it means that this is one possible way of being human. It's not a good possibility, but it's a possibility.

*For you film is like a painting. The photography, the images, have in this film a determined value. How can photography make us see spirit?*

You create an atmosphere *through* the image. You place yourself in an environment where you can *feel* the otherness. And there are the images and ideas and emotions that one extrapolates from cinema. There are certain intangible things that words simply can't express. So in the cinema, when you cut one image together with another, you get a completely different third image—a sensation, and impression, an idea—in the mind. So I think that the environment that you create is one thing, and that's a matter of photography. But

it's in the joining of images where the film holds you and speaks to you. That's editing, and it's the *action* of filmmaking.

*Where did you film Silence? Taiwan I hear. What motivated you to choose this place?*

It took many years to get *Silence* made, for many reasons, and we looked at quite a few locations around the world before we settled on Taiwan. We started with the real places in Japan where Shusaku Endo's novel takes place—Nagasaki, Sotome, Unzen Hot Springs—but we didn't end up filming there because it would have been prohibitively expensive. In addition to Japan, my production designer, Dante Ferretti, scouted New Zealand, Vancouver, Northern California and then, finally, Taiwan, which has extraordinary landscapes and coastlines that are virtually untouched, and that are visually close to the places in the novel. Right away, we realized that this was where we could make the picture.

*Was this film inspired by other films, at least in some parts of it? If yes, which ones?*

Really, I was on my own. I had to find my own way.

In general, I've been inspired by many films. Many Asian films. Many European films. Many American films. I live with them. They're with me. It's not really a matter of just this film or that film. Some of them I've gone back to many times — *The Searchers*, for instance, or *Vertigo*, or *8½*. The Rossellini films — *Open City*, *Paisan*, and *Voyage to Italy*. *Ordet*, on the other hand, I've only seen once. I can't go back to it. It's so pure, so beautiful, so shocking. In every instance, you're spiritually transported and transformed. None of these pictures are a matter of mere entertainment.

*Is there a film shot by you that you would place alongside «Silence» to make a comparison either because it is similar or because it is the opposite in its meaning?*

I suppose I could say that *Raging Bull* is similar. So is *Mean Streets*. And maybe *The Departed* is the opposite of *Silence*. I was attracted to Bill Monaghan's script because it was written from the

perspective of Boston Irish Catholicism, quite different from what I grew up with. By the end of *The Departed*, it's a moral ground zero. There's no place to go but up. And the sacrifices of the characters, in particular the character of Billy, played by Leonardo Di Caprio. Roger Ebert said that it's as if you could hear Billy in confession saying: «I knew it was bad, father, but I just couldn't help it. I was stuck. I knew it was wrong, but what could I do?» For me, it had a lot to do with September 11, examining our culture and our lives in the new light. It seemed to me that from that point, we had to start again morally. But we didn't.

In *Raging Bull*, he struggles everywhere all the time. No matter where he is: the ring, the gym, the street, the bedroom, the living room... he punishes himself everywhere and he also takes it out on everyone everywhere, all the time. Like Kichijiro. The difference is that Kichijiro is forced to do what he does, and Jake is not.

*Was there a situation or an event during the preparation of this film that made you particularly reflect?*

Well, as I said, I lived with the picture for so long, and it was put off and postponed so many times. So that's where the reflection occurred.

*Are there people of faith alongside of you who supported you in your research and then in the making of this film?*

It all begins with Archbishop Paul Moore of the Episcopal Church in New York at St. John the Divine, who gave me the novel to read back in the 80s. We screened *Last Temptation* for him, not knowing what his response would be, and he and I had a good dialogue about the picture. Just as he was leaving, he told me he was going to give me a book, which turned out to be *Silence*.

Father James Martin, S.J., who worked with Andrew Garfield on his Spiritual Exercises, was extremely important to us.

During production, we had the support and encouragement of several priests in Taipei, many of whom served as technical consultants on the film making sure that Andrew and Adam performed the sacraments authentically. They include Fr. Jerry Martinson, S.J. (Kuangchi Program Service); Fr. Alberto Nunez

Ortiz, S.J. (whom we found through Fu Jen University); and Archbishop Paul Russell and Fr. Ivan Santus at the Nunciature in Taipei.

We had several historical consultants including two Jesuits who were very helpful in the research for the film: David Collins, S.J. a historian at Georgetown University and Shinzo Kawamura, S.J. of Sophia University.

Van C. Gessel, a Japanese language professor at Brigham Young University, has translated most of Shusaku Endo's work into English and he has been a great support of the film and a direct link to Endo. We first consulted with him in 2011.

In 2009, when I visited the Twenty Six Martyrs Museum in Nagasaki, I met Renzo De Luca, S.J. and he was very helpful in providing the «Madonna of the Snows» scroll that appears in the film. Early on, my researcher met with Antoni Ucerler, S.J.

Our two main historical consultants were both raised Catholic and have been involved in the film since 2011. Jurgis Elisonas, an authority on Japan during the Early Modern Era has written extensively on the historic figure Ferreira and Liam Brockey, a historian who has written on the topic of 17<sup>th</sup> century missionaries and their presence in Asia, is currently President of the American Catholic Historical Association.

\* \* \*

With this list of names, friends, places my interview ended. Before taking my flight to Seoul, I met Martin Scorsese and his wife Helen one more time November 28. He asked me: «Tomorrow I meet with the Jesuits for the film screening. What can I say?» I suggest to him to talk about his experience of this film, but also his feelings that have gone along with it, the deep «well» from which it was drawn. I myself was drawn into that same well listening to his words in this conversation.