

The place of silence

St John Paul II writing in 2004 to mark the 40th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's document on the Liturgy said:

One aspect that we must foster in our communities with greater commitment is the experience of silence. We need silence “if we are to accept in our hearts the full resonance of the voice of the Holy Spirit and to unite our personal prayer more closely to the Word of God and the public voice of the Church”. In a society that lives at an increasingly frenetic pace, often deafened by noise and confused by the ephemeral, it is vital to rediscover the value of silence. The spread, also outside Christian worship, of practices of meditation that give priority to recollection is not accidental. Why not start with... daring a specific education...? Let us keep before our eyes the example of Jesus, who “rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed” (Mk 1: 35). The Liturgy, with its different moments and symbols, cannot ignore silence.¹

1. John Paul II, *Spiritus et Sponsa*[SS] 13

The desire for silence is a human phenomenon which many today search for. In *Do you love me? A guide to Catholic Spirituality* the bishops write of the importance of silence:

Real silence though is not just an absence of noise. We can be very noisy indeed on the inside even if the outside is quiet. It is also possible to be quiet on the inside while chaos reigns on the outside. This is because silence helps us get in touch with our real selves and opens the path for us to hear the still, small voice of God. Silence is indeed golden. For some of us, however, befriending silence is not easy. It can be difficult to find some silence in a noisy world, especially as it is such a rarity. It can be difficult because we are not used to it and we so easily get distracted. Sometimes we forget that the mind is there to think with. It abhors a vacuum so it is well nigh impossible for it to stop thinking. But we can quieten it and the worst thing we can do with distractions is be distracted by them. Let them go. Do not beat yourself up about them or give them undue attention. What silence does is to help us shift to a different interior space. It opens us up and balances us. So, how can we befriend it and discover the immense value it has?²

2. Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, *Do you love me? A guide to Catholic Spirituality*, page 41

St John Paul saw that pastors had a task to educate in prayer and linked this with the promotion of the liturgical life, through discernment and guidance. Part of the role of liturgy is to ‘instil a taste for prayer. To do so, it will of course take into account the ability of individual believers and their different conditions of age and culture; but in doing so it will not be content with the “minimum”’.³

3. SS 14

The Liturgy as the ‘source and summit’ of the life of the Church is where our silent prayer and reflection leads but also where it is experienced and nurtured. It is one of

4. Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC) 40

5. Catholic Bishops' Conference of England & Wales, *Celebrating the Mass* (CTM) 91

6. cf. *Lectionary for Mass Introduction* (LMI) 28

7. CTM 54, cf. *Musicam Sacram* (MS) 15

the languages of the liturgy: 'words and music, gesture and silence, movement, the liturgical colours of the vestments'.⁴ Therefore silence is not a separate part of some celebration but integral to the whole of all celebrations.

During liturgical silence all respond in their own way, recollecting themselves, pondering what has been heard, petitioning and praising God in their inmost spirit.⁵

In the silence the liturgy moves forward as one part flows to the next. For example, a pause for silence after the homily allows people to take the word of God to heart and to prepare a response to it in prayer.⁶ Silent reflection, such as this, is part of the essential dynamic of participation in the liturgy:

The active participation of the faithful is first of all internal in that their thoughts reflect what they hear, do, and say during the liturgy. It is also external in that through their outward bearing and gestures they express their inner participation in the liturgy. The ritual interplay of the internal and external elements of the liturgy conveys the transcendence and the immanence of the living God whom the assembly worships.⁷

Silence in the Celebration of Mass

The Roman Missal highlights a number of places in the Mass where silence is to be encouraged. These are considered below.

However it should be noted that not all liturgical silence is the same. It will differ in length and purpose according to the part of the celebration. It may be a short moment of recollection, a pause between parts of the liturgy or it may be a time of praise of God in people's hearts leading to prayer and petition.

The two places where the documents suggest the longest silence are after the homily and after the distribution of Holy Communion. At both these points it is expected that all present hold the silent reflection in common.

In general, within the liturgy, where there is silence it is shared by all. There are times when the silence accompanies a liturgical action so that it is what we see that prompts our prayerful response.

The different types of silence can be summarised as follows:

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|---------------------------|---|
| 1. Break | Short pause for clarity of structure & flow (e.g. before Liturgy of the Word) |
| 2. Pause for Recollection | Part of a larger action. (e.g. at the Collect, the pause for prayer following 'Let us pray'. Other places include Penitential Act, at the end of Readings, Preparation for Communion, Prayer after Communion) |
| 3. Silent attentive: | The assembly is silent while something happens: |
| a. listening | Readings |
| b. praying | Eucharistic Prayer, Collect |
| c. looking | Preparation of Gifts |

4. Silent Reflection

A more extended period after Homily or after Communion (leading to prayer or praise)

Silence in the Introductory Rites

The purpose of the Introductory Rites is ‘to ensure that the faithful, who come together as one, establish communion and dispose themselves to listen the Word of God and to celebrate the Eucharist worthily.’⁸

8. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) 47

Penitential Act

There is a ‘brief pause for silence’ after the opening invitation where the faithful after invited to ‘acknowledge our sins, and so prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries.’

Collect

After the invitation ‘Let us pray’ all pray in silence. Everybody ‘observes a brief silence so that they may become aware of being in God’s presence and may call to mind their intentions.’⁹

9. GIRM 54

Silence in the Liturgy of the Word

‘By silence and by singing, the people make this divine word their own, and affirm their adherence to it by means of the Profession of Faith; finally, having been nourished by the divine word, the people pour out their petitions by means of the Universal Prayer for the needs of the whole Church and for the salvation of the whole world.’¹⁰

10. GIRM 55

‘The Liturgy of the Word is to be celebrated in such a way as to favour meditation, and so any kind of haste such as hinders recollection is clearly to be avoided. In the course of it, brief periods of silence are also appropriate, accommodated to the assembled congregation; by means of these, under the action of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God may be grasped by the heart and a response through prayer may be prepared. It may be appropriate to observe such periods of silence, for example, before the Liturgy of the Word itself begins, after the First and Second Reading, and lastly at the conclusion of the Homily.’¹¹

11. GIRM 56

Readings

There is a brief moment of silence after the First and Second Readings so that that all may meditate on what they have heard.¹²

12. cf. GIRM 128

A brief prayerful silence is observed before a reading as the assembly prepares to listen God’s word. A somewhat longer period of silence is observed after the a reading, allowing all to ponder on the word spoken. It is often preferable for the reader to remain at the ambo during the silence. If this is not practicable care should be taken that the prayerful silence is established before the reader moves from or to the ambo, and that their movement does not break the silence.¹³

13. CTM 160

In some parishes this silence is assisted by the reader pausing before saying ‘The word of the Lord’. Elsewhere it can be helped by having different ministers for the first and second reading and psalm and enabling the silence by each minister approaching the ambo in a dignified manner.

People will be best able to make use of the silence to reflect on the word when the readings have been proclaimed well.

Homily

‘In the course of the homily, the hearts of believers keep silence and allow God to speak. The Lord and his people speak to one another in a thousand ways directly, without intermediaries. But in the homily they want someone to serve as an instrument and to express their feelings in such a way that afterwards, each one may choose how he or she will continue the conversation.’¹⁴

14. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (EV) 143

15. CTM 169
cf. GIRM 66,
LMI 28

‘It is most appropriate that a period of silence follow the Homily, so that the people may take the word of God to heart and prepare a response to it in prayer.’¹⁵

16. cf. GIRM 136

The homily may be given either standing at the chair or at the ambo or at another worthy place.¹⁶ To enable the reflection this suggests that the homily leads into silence and that the Priest or Deacon return to their place and sit down to indicate its length before carrying on with the Profession of Faith.

Prayer of the Faithful

The form of the intercessions would suggest that after the brief intention there is a brief pause for silent prayer. The intention may be followed by either a response or silence.¹⁷

17. cf. CTM 173,
GIRM 71

Silence in the Liturgy of the Eucharist

In the Liturgy of the Eucharist where the gifts of bread and wine are brought to the altar and the Eucharistic Prayer is offered so that the gifts become Christ’s Body and Blood the action of the Liturgy continues, things are being done, but sometimes in silence, allowing personal reflection and prayer in the moments of stillness.

Preparation of Gifts

When the gifts are brought to the altar the prayers ‘Blessed are you...’ may be said in one of three ways:

- In a low voice while the Offertory Chant or song is sung.
- In a low voice with no music
- Out loud with the people’s response ‘Blessed be God for ever’.

It might be argued that the Missal offers an order of preference for these options, with second providing a moment of stillness.

Eucharistic Prayer

‘Now the centre and high point of the entire celebration begins, namely, the Eucharistic Prayer itself, that is, the prayer of thanksgiving and sanctification. The Priest calls upon the people to lift up their hearts towards the Lord in prayer and

thanksgiving; he associates the people with himself in the Prayer that he addresses in the name of the entire community to God the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the meaning of this Prayer is that the whole congregation of the faithful joins with Christ in confessing the great deeds of God and in the offering of Sacrifice. The Eucharistic Prayer requires that everybody listens to it with reverence and in silence.’

‘The people, for their part, should associate themselves with the Priest in faith and in silence, as well as by means of their interventions as prescribed in the course of the Eucharistic Prayer: namely, the responses in the Preface dialogue, the Sanctus (Holy, Holy, Holy), the acclamation after the Consecration, the acclamation Amen after the concluding doxology.’¹⁸

18. GIRM 78, 147

At the heart of the Prayer is the showing of the consecrated elements to the people, first the Host, then the Chalice. This is an action which engages the gaze of the faithful leading them into contemplation and to respond in the Mystery of Faith.

‘At the conclusion of the Eucharistic Prayer, the priest should make a distinct pause to make clear that the Eucharistic Prayer is complete and that the Communion Rite is about to begin.’¹⁹

19. CTM 199

Silence in the Communion Rite

Through the Lord’s Prayer, Sign of Peace and Agnus Dei the faithful prepare to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord in Holy Communion.

Invitation to Communion

Following the Invitation ‘Behold the Lamb of God’ and the response the Priest prays quietly before receiving Holy Communion himself. ‘The faithful do the same, praying silently.’²⁰

20. GIRM 84

Communion Procession

The sung Communion Chant accompanies the procession to receive Holy Communion. Where the distribution takes a long time this might be interspersed with periods of silence.

Period of Silence after Communion

‘When Communion is completed, the whole assembly may observe a period of total silence. In the absence of all words, actions, music, or movement, a moment of deep corporate stillness and contemplation may be experienced. Such silence is important to the rhythm of the whole celebration and is welcome in a busy and restless world.

‘Silence and true stillness can be achieved if all, the assembly and its ministers, take part in it.

‘As an alternative or addition to silent contemplation, a psalm or song of praise may be sung. Since there should normally have been singing during Communion, silence may be more desirable.

21. CTM 215
cf. GIRM 45, 88,
164

‘This period of deep and tranquil communion is not to be interrupted. Parish announcements, if needed belong to the Concluding Rite. If there is need for a second collection this should also be taken during the Concluding Rite or after Mass. Nor should this silence be broken or overlaid by the public reading of devotional material.’²¹

22. cf. GIRM 165

Where there has not been a suitable silence after Communion the Priest is encouraged to have a brief period of silence after he says ‘Let us pray.’²²

Silence in the Concluding Rites

‘After the Communion Rite, the Mass closes with a brief Concluding Rite. Its purpose is to send the people forth to put into effect in their daily lives the Paschal Mystery and the unity in Christ which they have celebrated. They are given a sense of abiding mission, which calls them to witness to Christ in the world and to bring the Gospel to the poor.’²³

23. CTM 217

The brevity of the Concluding Rites does not pause to allow for extended silence.

Silence before the Celebration of Mass

The reception of Holy Communion is both a personal and a communal act. It is a mark of personal faith in Jesus but also an expression of our faith in the communion of the Church.

In a similar way, preparation for Mass is both a personal and communal time. As people gather there to prepare as a community, there is need for the news of the life of the community to be exchanged, so that its lived experience and concerns are brought to the Eucharist. There is also a need for liturgical ministers to prepare and work together. Some churches will have spaces, such as a narthex, sacristies etc., which allow this to be done outside the body of the church.

There is also a need for the personal preparation, to recollect in prayer, to maybe reflect on the readings. Fruitful participation in the liturgy does not just happen. Pope Benedict wrote of how we need to foster an openness to our constant conversion to Christ.

Active participation in the eucharistic liturgy can hardly be expected if one approaches it superficially, without an examination of his or her life. This inner disposition can be fostered, for example, by recollection and silence for at least a few moments before the beginning of the liturgy, by fasting and, when necessary, by sacramental confession. A heart reconciled to God makes genuine participation possible. The faithful need to be reminded that there can be no *actuosa participatio* in the sacred mysteries without an accompanying effort to participate actively in the life of the Church as a whole, including a missionary commitment to bring Christ’s love into the life of society.²⁴

24. Pope Benedict,
*Sacramentum
Caritatis* (SacCar)
55

A time of silence should be reverent and welcoming. Some parishes find it useful some minutes before Mass begins to have a brief announcement or other signal inviting people into silence. This can be appropriate in other celebrations as well.

Even before the celebration itself, calm and quiet opportunities for silent prayer and reflection have their proper place in the church, in the sacristy and in adjacent areas so that those gathering for the assembly of the Church may recollect themselves and begin to prepare for prayer together. Providing opportunities for such calm and quiet is one of the many ways in which a community is able to show hospitality to those gathering for worship.²⁵

25. CTM 92 cf. GIRM
45

Fostering Silence

The fruit of silence is prayer.

The fruit of prayer is faith.

The fruit of faith is love.

The fruit of love is service.

*The fruit of service is peace.*²⁶

26. St Teresa of
Calcutta

St John Paul recognised that there was not just a need for silence but also that it needed to be developed.

The Priest can set good example with his own personal preparation for the liturgy and his prayerful, dignified celebration of the liturgy.

For some of the parts of the Mass where silence is sought, such as after the readings, it can be achieved through the confident action of the minister.

Other parts require the collaboration of a number of ministers to be effective so that a planned silence is not perceived as 'someone has forgotten something'. As suggested above the period of silence after Communion should be shared by all ministers but this requires a common understanding and preparation. When a minister is required to move in a time of silence they should do so with grace, dignity and purpose.

When a congregation is able to achieve a certain discipline in how it gathers and how it prepares for prayer it too sets good example.

Where Priests and communities wish to develop the celebration of Mass with more prayerful silences perhaps the first task is to observe where it is currently present, perhaps using the current document as a checklist or guide. Not every opportunity for silence should be introduced at once and care should be taken that it is seen as an integral part of the liturgy helping to a fuller prayerful participation in the liturgy, rather than just an imposition of silence by everything coming to a stop. The moments of silence are when we reflected on what we have heard and seen so that we can respond.

In the celebration of Sacraments and other rites it can be challenging to help people to use silence, especially if they are unfamiliar with being in church. However an authentic invitation into silence can be positively received and provide for people a time of stillness which the world does not give.

Times of silence in the liturgy needs to be developed and through careful preparation even grow in length. Not everyone will be comfortably initially and may need to help how to engage with the longer periods of stillness. Through careful invitation even young children can engage in awe and wonder.

Schools of Silence

Other opportunities for praying in silence should be encouraged.

- Both personal and communal habits of prayer will both strengthen and be strengthened by prayerful silences within Mass. This can be practised by how the Liturgy of the Hours is prayed whether individually or with a group.
- Many have discovered *Lectio Divina* as a prayerful way of reflecting on the Scriptures. ‘Only in silence can the word of God find a home in us,’ The use of scripture and silence could become part of the prayer at any parish meeting.
- Many schools have introduced children to Christian meditation and the fruits of this could be shared in the liturgy — the children may find they have a gift to offer to their parents.

Above all there is prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. Pope Benedict wrote:

I heartily recommend to the Church’s pastors and to the People of God the practice of eucharistic adoration, both individually and in community. Great benefit would ensue from a suitable catechesis explaining the importance of this act of worship, which enables the faithful to experience the liturgical celebration more fully and more fruitfully. ...I also recommend that, in their catechetical training, and especially in their preparation for First Holy Communion, children be taught the meaning and the beauty of spending time with Jesus, and helped to cultivate a sense of awe before his presence in the Eucharist.²⁷

27. SacCar 67

Conclusion

Blessed Pope Paul VI reflecting on the life of the Holy Family in Nazareth offered these thoughts.

May esteem for silence, that admirable and indispensable condition of mind, revive in us, besieged as we are by so many uplifted voices, the general noise and uproar, in our seething and over-sensitised modern life.

May the silence of Nazareth teach us recollection, inwardness, the disposition to listen to good inspirations and the teachings of true masters. May it teach us the need for and the value of preparation, of study, of meditation, of personal inner life, of the prayer which God alone sees in secret.

The Place of Silence is a document of the Liturgy Committee of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales. It can be found with related resources on the Liturgy Office website: www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources

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