

How Catholics Worship: What we do and why we do it.

Sacred Silence in the Liturgy



Office of
Evangelization and Worship

A complaint which some Catholics have about the post Vatican II liturgy is that it is noisy, that it does not afford them sufficient (or any) time for silent prayer. It is true, especially in ecclesial communities that are small and where most people know one another as neighbors. Often there is considerable conversation, greeting or song rehearsal going on before Mass begins. This can truly be a source of distraction to those who simply want a few moments of quiet before or after mass in order to talk to their God. There is already an excess of physical and emotional noise in our lives. Of all the places in our world, therefore, where one ought to be able to experience the silence of the sacred, our churches ought to be foremost.

Having said that, however, we need to add that our liturgy, by its very nature and framework, does actually include and demand certain moments of silence to be kept by the assembly. It is often only in stillness and silence that we are able to hear God's voice. Silence, therefore, is an integral part of every liturgy. It is called "sacred" for it is in this sort of silence that we are able to meet our God. What are these moments of silence we are invited to keep in the liturgy?

The Penitential Rite: Following the opening greeting at the beginning of Mass, the presider invites each member of the assembly to call to mind our sins and reflect on our need for repentance. We need these few moments not only to put aside the distractions of the world from which we have just come but also to admit our unworthiness to enter God's presence.

The Opening Prayer: Several times during the Mass, the presider introduces a prayer with the invitation, "Let us pray." He then pauses for a few moments so that each of us, individually and as a community can have the opportunity to "collect" ourselves, ---body, mind and spirit ---and add our own intention to that of the presider. He then "collects" all our individual prayers into the one prayer which he says aloud.

The Liturgy of the Word: Once each of the scripture lessons, the Gospel or the homily has been proclaimed, we are given a few moments to "let the words sink in", or to take in more deeply what we have just heard.

After the Communion Procession: The last of the designated times for silence during Mass is after all have received Communion. As people are receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, we are asked to symbolize our unity as a Christian assembly by standing and singing together the Communion song. When **all** have received Communion, we have time to make our personal thanksgiving and to reflect on how we will return to the world to bring God's good news to all whom we may meet.

It is obvious that the liturgy provides us times not only for "private silence", but especially the opportunity to pray together as a Christian assembly in "Sacred Silence."