

Liturgical Q & A:

The Moments of Silence During the Mass

Question: What should I be doing in times of silence during Mass? Also, I used to be able to enjoy some moments for quiet prayer before Mass. Now, the choir rehearses, the sacristan scurries about, and people chatter. What can be done about this? I need some quiet time before the liturgy begins.

Response: Silence is an endangered species in most Roman Catholic liturgies today. Contrary to what some may think, silence does not mean that the priest has lost his place or dozed off.

Silence in the liturgy is not that frustrating void we feel when the audio portion of a television or radio program goes silent. Yes, words are crucial in the liturgy: words of the songs we sing, words of the Scripture readings that we hear, words of the prayers we pray together. God addresses God's Word to us, and we address words to God and to each other. But silence is what helps us discover the meaning and power of all these words. We couldn't hear or appreciate the notes in a piece of music if there weren't the tiniest moment of silence between them. Silence is a way for the many words of the liturgy to "sink in," to be absorbed into our minds and hearts like rain falling upon ground well-prepared to receive it. And what we should be doing during the moments of silence during the liturgy depends on when they come.

The new *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) states that "at the penitential rite and again after the invitation to pray, all recollect themselves" (#45). Here we are asked to collect, bring together, our body, soul, mind and spirit, so that we can focus our whole self on what we are doing: praying silently in our hearts so that we can pray fervently to God in the words of the penitential rite or opening prayer.

After each of the Scripture readings and the homily, a period of silence helps us make the message our own. Silence here opens our spiritual ears to hear what the prophet Elijah heard at Mount Horeb: the tiny, whispering sound of God's voice addressed to each of us (see 1 Kings 19:12)

After we and our fellow worshippers have received Communion, we may spend some time in silent prayer. Silence invites us to praise and thank God for giving us the Body and Blood of Christ to nourish us. This silent prayer after the assembly has received Communion helps us to reflect on our oneness with Jesus Christ who comes to us in the Eucharist and who empowers us to go forth to live his Gospel in the world. This is not a time for preparing to leave church (for example, putting on our coats and gathering our belongings). Rather, it is a time to prepare ourselves spiritually for living the Eucharist in our daily lives. Sometimes, instead of silence, a sung psalm or hymn may help us to do this. If so, then the brief period of silence after the priest's "Let us pray" before the prayer after Communion will be welcome (just as it was before the Opening Prayer of the Mass). Our prayerful silence at these times will help our fellow worshippers to enjoy the same.

The new GIRM tells us that "Even before the celebration itself, it is praiseworthy for silence to be observed in church, in the sacristy and adjacent areas, so that all may dispose themselves for the sacred rites which are to be enacted in a devout and fitting manner" (#45). These words are new in this document. Perhaps they address the concern you raised in your question: your need to pray in silence before the liturgy begins, and your difficulty in doing so because of worshippers being greeted and greeting each other as they assemble, choirs warming up, and other preparations being made. It has been suggested that the GIRM's words about silence before Mass reflect the situation in the city of Rome, where visitors can visit loudly with each other in the piazza in front of church before entering for the Eucharist. In our country, a separate gathering space for pre- and post-liturgy hospitality is not a reality in some churches. Thus the tension between the desire for silent, personal prayer before liturgy and the sounds of welcome and

preparation remains. One would hope that the sanctuary be in good order at least five minutes (or more) before the liturgy begins, so that practicing with liturgical ministers and fussing with liturgical furnishings will not be distracting. Still, words or a greeting for worshippers as they enter the church are, for many, a most human expression of divine

welcome. The Lord Jesus, who is present in our tabernacles, rejoices to receive the personal prayers that we offer to him. But can we doubt that he also rejoices in the expressions of welcome and concern that we give to each other, the members of his body assembling for worship?

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Liturgical Catechesis on the Eucharist

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