

Three Minute Liturgical Catechesis

Article 7: The Sound of Silence

It seemed like a typical Sunday Mass in a typical parish. The opening hymn was joyful, the Sprinkling Rite was effective, and the Glory to God was sung with vigor. Then the presider said, "Let us pray." The server brought the book to him, but nothing happened. Ten seconds became fifteen, then twenty. People began to look around nervously and wondered: What's Father waiting for? Did he fall asleep? Is he having a seizure?

In fact, he was simply doing what the liturgy intends. The missal says that, after the priest says "Let us pray," the priest and people "pray silently for a while." In some Masses that "while" lasts only a few seconds, but it is intended to be a brief yet significant pause for silent prayer. This is an appropriate time for each of us to recall our particular needs and hopes and present them to the Lord. Then the priest gathers our prayers into one opening prayer, sometimes called a "collect" because it collects our prayers together.

This is one of several places in the liturgy that silence is encouraged by the official books. The liturgy must always be a blend of sounds and silence. Since liturgy is communal worship, it is natural that most of the time we are together will be filled with vocal and musical prayer. Yet there is also a need for moments of silence to allow ourselves to enter more deeply into the worship we share.

The entrance rites contain two moments for silence: a brief one during the penitential rite and a bit longer one before the opening prayer. During the Liturgy of the Word, several other moments call for times of silence. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal encourages such silences before the Liturgy of the Word itself begins, (that is, before the first reading), after the first and second readings and after the homily. It calls for such silences so that "the word of God may be grasped by the heart and a response through prayer may be prepared" (# 56).

Another extended time of silence in the liturgy comes after all have received communion. During the communion procession, everyone should be singing the communion song as a sign of our union in Christ. When all the movement of the procession is completed, we sit down together and spend some time in shared silent prayer.

These times of silence don't work automatically, of course. It takes a deliberate effort from every member of the assembly even to allow silence to occur. The ministers up front may be quiet, but shared silence also requires the assembly to embrace it. Sometimes we seem a bit uncomfortable with silence, because we live in a world of almost constant noise. We need to learn how to be silent together.

And in the silence, each of us must decide whether to engage in sincere prayer or just to daydream. If we embrace these times of silent prayer, however, they can do much to enrich our experience of the liturgy, drawing us closer to Christ and to one another as we worship together.