



SILENCE

Of all the elements that make up the Mass, that is, the Liturgy of the Eucharist, perhaps the most important is **silence**. It is one of the elements of liturgy singled out in the opening chapters of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) for special treatment. Silence comes in different flavors according to the GIRM. Each call for silence has a unique purpose, to reflect on what has been said; to give thanks for what has been given; to acknowledge our need for mercy and the day-to-day need for God’s intercession in our lives.

In a world that has so little silence, given the constant demand for attention from phone calls, texts and emails, it is a wonder to me that more people don’t demand silence in their lives—and their liturgies. I often hear that today’s youth love retreats and adoration because of the simple attraction of silence. It is meant to be part of every liturgy, but it is most important at our Sunday and anticipated Masses when the majority of the community is present. Here’s a brief review of when the liturgy calls for silence and how that time should be spent.

“Let us pray”—Each time the priest says these words: before the *Collect*, or opening prayer, where the priest “collects” the prayers of the assembly; surrounding the readings and before the *Prayer After Communion*, the liturgy calls for a brief period of silence so that the community may join its prayer with that of the whole church. How long that silence lasts may depend on where your community is spiritually and where it wants to be.

Penitential Act— “Let us acknowledge our sins,” the priest says, not in the way we might articulate them in the Sacrament of Penance, but in a way that acknowledges our call to ongoing conversion, our need for God’s mercy and reconciliation with

others. How much silence do you need for this reflection before we proclaim our faith in the mercy of our God? Priests and deacons might start with a brief pause and then extend it slowly over time to meet the needs of the assembly.

The Liturgy of the Word— This entire part of the liturgy is to be celebrated in a meditative way, the GIRM says, so that all can ponder God’s word. Periods of silence are appropriate before and after the readings and after the homily. Beware lectors, cantors, deacons and presiders! How long, O Lord? Give feedback to your liturgy committee about how much silence is enough to help.

The Universal Prayer—Otherwise known as the *Prayers of the Faithful*, this prayer closes the Liturgy of the Word. In it, the faithful respond to the Word, and through their petitions and response, pray to God for the salvation of all. Like the readings and psalm above, they are to be offered in a meditative style. By first stating the area of concern, “For the Church,” and then pausing before the specific intention “that we may...” the faithful have a brief period of silence to reflect on their own prayer for the Church.

The Communion Rite—Extending from the *Our Father* through the *Prayer After Communion*, this rite includes a time of silence after all have received Communion according to the GIRM. At least some time of silence is helpful as a regular practice. The length of time may vary depending on the day. Much more on silence and the Communion Rite in a later issue.

Silence is a apt topic for a liturgy committee to explore. Consider the power of the passage from Psalm 46: “Be still and know that I am God.” In your community, how much silence is enough? Too much? What would help the community appreciate the silence that is often called the sound of God?