

Mass Matters by Fr. Bausch
Chapter 5 A Vestibule Reflection

You've arrived at church. As you enter the main body of the church, is there a tension between fellowship and a sense of holy ground, or between chit chat and silence? Tricky issues.

Let me gently set up the problem by relating this strategy. Every five or six years during the after-the-summer month of September, when things come to life again, I would have sent out name tag stickers to all the parishioners asking them to magic-marker their names on them and wear them to church. (For those who forget, ushers were ready to supply them.) Before Mass began, I would ask the people to turn to one another and introduce themselves. This was always a pleasant and happy interchange and we would do it for the whole month. Other times we would move the sign of peace to the beginning of Mass. Conversation, greetings, and camaraderie are good ways to begin.

I have to tread lightly when I ask if all this ever eventually segues into awareness that we are on holy ground or, on the other hand, does there remain a kind of leftover marketplace atmosphere that we brought with us? Is there a sense of sanctuary? This feeling is indicated by the subtle shift from the vertical to the horizontal, that is, from a sense of something or "Someone" beyond us to only us, from the awesome of Alpha and Omega to our interests. Or let me express it by observing that the felt sense of otherness, of mystery, seems to have evaporated. It's a loss that even the progressive liturgists mourn. The scriptural admonition, "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Exod. 3:5) has become a challenging command for an over-stimulated generation raised on an American sense of democracy where all lines have been erased. Reverence doesn't come easily.

In this brief chapter - more like a meditation - uneasily I muse about reverence and silence. Again, these are tricky issues. I surely don't want to dispense with the folksy camaraderie of familiar friends who meet weekly. As pastor, I liked to walk around the church to nod a welcome. Having greeters is a great way to welcome parishioners and visitors. The name-tag routine I mentioned is effective. Chatting after Mass, eating donuts, and sipping coffee in the parish hall afterwards is standard fellowship. A friendly community is the best advertisement for the faith. What I have in mind, however, is the excessive kind of "mall" chatter and "mall" overtone that I have encountered in some parishes. Yes, "mall" is the right metaphor.

The Buzz - I know that some people addicted to around-the-clock- noise tend to find silence of any sort quite intolerable. I know that business is a hallmark of importance in modern society. Perhaps, too, the emphasis on celebration and overly wordy liturgies has dulled our appetite of an "otherness" sense. Maybe there is little sense of reverence, either because the architecture is uninspiring (the church looks like Home Depot) or distractions are the order of the day. In any case, a mall atmosphere intrudes. At one parish I know, the folk group loudly practices before Mass. Ushers exchange small talk. In-the-pew conversations go on. Smart phones are checked. The sacristy is a little clubroom full of chatter. There's a distinct buzz. The flickering of the old sanctuary lamp conveys nothing anymore. A kind of background hum lingers.

I think of Dorothy Day. Even before she was converted she would sometimes attend Mass nearby and be enthralled. Of the experience she wrote that she "knelt in the back of the church, not knowing what was going on at the altar, but was warmed and comforted by the lights and the silence, the kneeling people and the atmosphere of worship. People have so great a need to reverence, to worship, to adore." Maybe they still do, but too often the reality is that anyone

who comes to church early to catch a few moments of reflection and silence will have to look elsewhere. For some people church is a busy place, but not necessarily a prayerful place.

Contemplate this image: Before the beginning of a symphony, the conductor holds his baton erect to call forth silence. Then, after the silence is established, comes beautiful music. So it is with our spiritual lives. The great modern spiritual guide, Thomas Merton, wrote:

“Let there always be quiet, dark churches in which men can take refuge. Places where they can kneel in silence. Houses of God filled with His silent presence. Here, even when they do not know how to pray, at least they can be still and breathe easily. Let there be a place somewhere in which you can breathe naturally, quietly, and not have to take your breathing in continuous short gasps. A place where your mind can be idle, forget its concerns, descend into silence and worship the Father in secret.”

Jesus often went apart by himself to think and pray. The Desert Fathers learned deep wisdom in solitude. The mystics proclaim again and again the value of silence. Modern psychiatry praises its value as a condition for mental health and for living a balanced life. Social workers catalog the moral and emotional wreckage of the overextended, overburdened life.

I admit that creating an atmosphere of worship, achieving the balance between the rituals of welcome and the mood of silence combined with a sense of both common and holy ground is a hard one to achieve, especially, I think, for a generation longing for the transcendent while burdened with an anemic sense of the hierarchy of things. I think I'm baying at the moon here, but all I wanted to convey is that we must find some way to be mindful of holy ground and holy silence when we, as Church, go to church.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think of this: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that we take a break from the distractions of the world, not as a rest to give us more strength to dive back in, but as the climax of living. By cutting off work and technology, we enter a different state of consciousness, a different dimension of time.

2. This has been a difficult issue for our parish. The coming together of our community each week for Mass is a joyful event. We welcome each other with smiles and happy words. For others coming to church a few minutes early is an effort to quietly ready themselves for Mass. How do we recognize the needs of everyone and allow our joyful, perhaps noisy, coming together to transition into a quiet readying of ourselves to encounter Jesus in the Mass?