

SACRED SILENCE IN THE LITURGY



We are realizing more and more clearly that silence is part of the liturgy. We respond, by singing and praying, to the God who addresses us, but the greater mystery, surpassing all words, summons us to silence. It must, of course, be a silence with content, not just the absence of speech and action. We should expect the liturgy to give us a positive stillness that will restore us.

**Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger
(Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI):
The Spirit of the Liturgy (2000)**

Today we turn our attention to the need for *sacred silence* in the liturgy.

Does the Church ask for silence? The Second Vatican Council declared that “At the proper times all should observe a reverent silence.” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, #30). This reverent silence can be expressed differently during the various parts of the Mass and in each liturgical season.

How can silence be sacred? As we discussed in a previous issue, the Church’s traditional criteria for sacredness include *holiness*, *beauty*, and *universality*. When silence in the liturgy encompasses these three qualities, it becomes sacred: set apart for worship. When we leave the hustle and bustle of our daily lives and enter into the presence of the Blessed Sacrament in Christ’s Holy Temple, it is appropriate that we assume external and internal changes. We adjust our demeanor, our musical expression, and perhaps even our way of dress to contrast what we are used to in the secular world for the purpose of worship.

Does the Church’s call for sacred silence conflict with her call for us to sing the Mass? Absolute external silence is not always merited, but rather an opening of our hearts to quietly listen and meditate on the Word of God Incarnate and the sacred mystery of the Mass. There is a time for singing and a time for listening and reflecting. The Church does not ask each member of the congregation to personally sing every part of the Mass. Limiting or lowering the volume of the sounds that surround us can be a means of achieving sacred silence, but the Church also encourages an interior silence that helps us listen and reflect upon the mystery of the Mass, including the Word of God as it is recited or sung by others.



What are some different ways we can experience sacred silence? The General Instruction of the Roman Missal encourages the sacred ministers and the faithful to prepare themselves for silence in the church a few minutes before Mass. This silence is not necessarily achieved by an absence of music, but by reverent and considerate suppression of speech and unnecessary noise. (GIRM #45)

During the Mass, opportunities for sacred silence are built in. For example, we silently join in the Eucharistic prayers of the priest, including some that are supposed to be recited in an inaudible tone. Other opportunities for sacred silence include quietly observing the processions and sacred actions during the Mass and listening attentively to the readings, the homily and the chanting of the Scriptural Propers by the choir and/or cantor. Church rubrics also give the option for absolute silence after Communion: "When the distribution of Communion is over, if appropriate, the Priest and faithful pray quietly for some time." (GIRM #88)

Our Lenten Masses seem quieter. Why? The flow of the liturgical year offers varying opportunities for silence, respective of the character of the season. As we enter Lent here at the Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul, we should notice changes in the church surroundings and in the celebration of the Mass. The rubrics for Lent call for the limitation of all instrumental music, including the organ. Just as the altar is devoid of flowers, the organ preludes, postludes, and interludes we are accustomed to are noticeably absent.

...In Lent the playing of the organ and musical instruments is allowed only to support the singing. Exceptions, however, are Laetare Sunday (Fourth Sunday of Lent), Solemnities, and Feasts.
(GIRM #33)

During Lent, more of our singing at the Basilica is *a capella* or with minimal organ accompaniment, and the priest and other sacred ministers recess in silence. These periods of absolute silence and quieter music provide a stark contrast with the other times of the year, giving us an opportunity to embrace the penitential nature of Lent and the fasting that it inspires. These occasions of stillness can be poignant and moving, when held in context with the prayers, Scriptures and themes of the Mass. When Easter comes around, we will be ready to trade the sparseness of our Lenten silence for joyous organ playing and festive choral music before, during, and after the Mass, while we silently reflect on the joyous themes of Eastertide.

The virginity of Mary, the birth and death of the Lord are three resounding mysteries which God worked in silence. – St. Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Christians of Ephesus

Some of God's greatest mysteries occurred in silence. Let us contemplate the mysteries of the Sacred Liturgy and grow in virtue as we surround ourselves in sacred silence at Mass.

References

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM):

<http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/the-mass/general-instruction-of-the-roman-missal/>

"Factum est silentium in caelo: The Silence of Sound in the Heavenly Liturgy and the Renewal of the Sacred Liturgy,"
Nathan J. Knutson, *Sacred Music* (Fall 2014)