

**Homily for May 11, 2003
4th Sunday of Easter Year B**

By Father Charles Bowes

**Acts 4:8-12
1 John 3:1-2
John 10:11-18**

Through our shared silence, we too hear the voice of the Good Shepherd.

In John chapter 10 today, Jesus is portrayed as the Good Shepherd, proclaiming about those he hopes to lead: “They will hear my voice, and they will be one flock, one shepherd.” Just what does it take in today’s world, to hear the voice of the Lord?

Our Catholic liturgy, our Mass, is designed to help us do just that – hear. And, as I’ve been mentioning these past couple of weeks, we’re in the process of receiving a new Instruction from our bishops and from the Pope regarding our praying the Eucharist – refinements which will enable us to recognize the Lord more clearly – to hear the Lord’s voice. These six weeks of Easter are the traditional time in which our newly received and baptized are instructed in the practice of our Catholic prayers, since they’ve been dismissed throughout the Catechuminate process to break further the bread of the word in another location. Now that we are all together, it’s important that we gain a deeper understanding of our faith. And this week, I would like to talk about how we use silence at Mass.

Our new General Instruction for the Roman Missal instructs that silence is to be especially sought after and cherished and encouraged. We use silence in this

parish at Mass pretty consistently. You will notice that at the beginning of Mass, after our opening hymn when the priest says, “Let us pray,” I usually pause for a period of time. That pause is deliberate – it’s not an accident – I’m not looking for my place in the book. It’s our first formal use of silence in the liturgy, a time recollect to be aware, to call attention to the here and now. A time to put in perspective all the distractions that got us here and that might preoccupy us in other moments – the job, the family, the health issues. Silence gives permission for us to be powerless over all that; silence permits us to rest in God for the duration of the silent moment. It’s ok to be weak or powerless in the presence of God. Silence calls us to that – we don’t have to produce or do anything but be silent, aware that we are now in the presence of God and of one another. Because one of the presences of God for us Catholics is in the gathered people, silence helps us focus on that. It helps us recollect, to know where we are right now.

We also use silences before and after the readings – there are brief times of silence – again people haven’t lost their place – it’s deliberate to recollect us, to provide a moment to reflect upon what we’ve heard.

There’s also silence after Communion – no, I’m not asleep up here, again – it’s a time for recollection and

for private prayer. A time to reflect upon this awesome mystery of becoming what we receive in Holy Communion as the Body of Christ. We have gone through the motions of being one through the listening and the praising, in the procession and in the common posture of receiving Communion so that we can become in some way connected to the Lord in and through one another and through this magnificent sacrament. The silence after Communion is to reflect on that.

The silence used at Mass does not mean that it must be distraction-free, as though other noises or sounds in the building somehow should not be there – like a little child making a noise or someone coughing – all those sounds are part of the silence that we treasure because they say “life” to us. There was a Saint that lived centuries ago who wanted more silence in his busy day working in a metals foundry – a place of incessant noise. He was so frustrated until he hit upon this ingenious way to pray: he listened more intently to the noise around him and gave that sound to God, and out of that his whole day was filled with prayer. That’s how we can use our silence to pay more attention to the sounds we hear in our midst – to be aware thereby that this is indeed the Body of Christ, with all sorts of us becoming one in the risen Lord.

This is certainly a very noisy world in which we live – we become so accustomed and even addicted to the blare of radios and television and CDs and horns and cell phones that it becomes difficult for us to become comfortable with silence. So here, let’s treasure it. Let’s pay attention to it. Let’s enjoy it as God’s gift to us through this wonderful liturgy given us by the Church. So that God can find us, and thereby we discover ourselves to be in the presence of God.

So, I’m going to ask you to sit up straight as best you can, to close your eyes and for a moment just listen to the sound of silence here, and I will be quiet for a little bit. Now I ask this question for you to answer in your heart. What does it feel like to be quiet? Some responses others have made to this question:

“Its really hard for me to be quiet – I’m antsy.”

“It’s like a drop of cool water in my daily desert of noise.”

“I didn’t realize how much I long for silence.”

“It’s the first time I’ve felt comfortable paying attention to the sounds around me in church.”

Now, I’m going to invite us to pray and follow that with a silent pause for us to savor. “Let us pray.” And I ask this question: What did it feel like to be silent in response to that invitation to pray? Some responses people have given:

“That’s the first time I heard the word ‘us’ in ‘let us pray.’ I always thought it was just that I prayed by myself.”

“I felt part of something or someone much bigger than me.”

“All I could say was, ‘God, help me.’ And somehow that was enough – I’ve got more troubles than I can name.”

“I felt that somehow I’m not alone.”

As in previous weeks, you’re welcome after Mass to stop by the parish office for some coffee and an opportunity to reflect further upon our prayer.

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