

By Father Charles Bowes

Isaiah 49:3, 5-6
1 Corinthians 1:1-3
John 1:29-34

Here at Mass, even our silence puts us in touch with the living God.

We continue our reflections on the Mass as part of this Year of the Eucharist, initiated by Pope John Paul II. This week, we reflect on silence – something we did two years ago when we received the new General Instruction of the Roman Missal. But it's appropriate to return to that in this special year.

Perhaps you've had this experience here or in another parish. It seemed like a typical Sunday Mass in a typical parish. The opening hymn was joyful. It was the Easter Season, so the Sprinkling Rite was effective, and the Glory to God was sung with vigor. But then the presider said, "Let us pray." The server held the book for him, but nothing happened. Ten seconds became 15, then 20. 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. It can also be a moment wherein we simply become aware, pay attention to the present moment and that we are part of a larger body at prayer. Then, after that time of silence, 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 where the official books encourage silence. 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 sings the communion song as a sign of our union in Christ. When all of 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.

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 speak 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 unique way to pray, an 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. And, of course, we can employ that silence to speak to God through Jesus – specifically about our needs and hopes.

And in the silence, each of us must decide whether to engage in sincere prayer or just to daydream. As a wise teacher once told me about silence at Mass: "Either you pray, or you get bored." 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.

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