

What are the appropriate times for silence?

Although scripture usually makes mention of vocal prayer and communal hymns when the people of God gather together for worship (e.g., Eph 5:19), there are also various allusions to silence being appropriate at certain times associated with prayer (e.g., Ps 4:5, 1 Sam 1:13, 1 Cor 14:15). Reference to silence during the liturgy is also explicitly mentioned in the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (no. 30), in the context of communal activities to foster active participation.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) mentions several locations where silence is appropriate (no. 45), but also suggests that silence plays at least three different roles during the liturgy depending on when it is observed.

—Silence helps *recollection*, particularly before the act of penitence at the beginning of Mass and after the invitations (“Let us pray”) to the major presidential prayers.

—Silence helps *reflection and meditation*, especially after each of the scriptural readings or after the homily.

—Silence helps *personal prayer* to our God, especially after Communion.

The Introduction to the Lectionary (no. 28) and the 2002 GIRM (no. 56) also note that “any sort of haste that hinders recollection must be clearly avoided.” Thus, it is particularly appropriate to include silence during the liturgy of the word, so that “by the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, the word of God may be grasped by the heart and a response may be prepared through prayer.” Thus, in addition to silence *after* the readings, it is also appropriate to include a moment of silence *before* the first reading is proclaimed.

One other appropriate place for silence in the course of the Mass is during the general intercessions (“prayers of the faithful”).

Although most often the assembly joins in prayer for the announced intention by an audible response (such as “Lord, hear our prayer”), it is

also permitted to respond by prayerful silence (GIRM no. 71). In many places, this silent “response” is the way the assembly participates in prayer during the solemn intercessions of Good Friday.

Quiet, reflective time for true reflection and prayer is not the same as the quiet necessary in a classroom to enable a teacher to speak and be heard. A period of prayer-filled silence before a reading is not merely a courtesy to the reader, deacon, or priest who will proclaim God’s word, enabling that word to be heard more easily. Periods of liturgical silence are meant to be communal acts in which the assembly gathered together permits God's whisper to be heard in the midst of the multiple voices that cry to us, as individuals and as the body of Christ, to gain our attention and allegiance. Through this communal, liturgical silence, each worshipper is better able to open his or her being to God's life and love.

We live in a very “noisy” world. As a society, we have become so accustomed to (and even addicted to) the blare of radios, televisions, CDs, horns, and cell phones that it is very difficult for some people to become comfortable with silence and to focus on personal thoughts and the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the only place that silence is socially acceptable is in a place of worship, when individuals come early, before a service begins, to be alone with their God and to listen quietly to the whispering of the Lord as if in a gentle breeze (cf. 1 Kgs 19:12). Silence enables our loving God to speak to us, individually and communally, in “words” of love, words that speak to our hearts, words that invite us to draw nearer to him.

In the midst of the multiple sounds that surrounds and the various voices that cry out to us, communal periods of reverential silence at various times in the liturgy are welcome additions that assists our loving God communicate his life and love to his people gathered together in prayer.

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