

Pastoral Letter on Silence

by Rev. Shaun C. Wesley

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“Praying, as every true dialogue, is also knowing how to be in silence — in dialogues there are moments of silence — in silence together with Jesus. When we go to Mass, perhaps we arrive five minutes early and begin to chat with the person next to us. But this is not the moment for small talk; it is the moment of silence to prepare ourselves for the dialogue. It is the moment for recollection within the heart, to prepare ourselves for the encounter with Jesus. Silence is so important! Remember what I said last week: we are not going to a spectacle, we are going to the encounter with the Lord, and silence prepares us and accompanies us.”—Pope Francis, General Audience, November 15, 2017

“Adoration is the first attitude of man acknowledging that he is a creature before his Creator. It exalts the greatness of the Lord who made us and the almighty power of the Savior who sets us free from evil. Adoration is homage of the spirit to the "King of Glory," respectful silence in the presence of the "ever greater" God. Adoration of the thrice-holy and sovereign God of love blends with humility and gives assurance to our supplications.”—Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 2628

“Sacred silence also, as part of the celebration, is to be observed at the designated times... Even before the celebration itself, it is commendable that silence to be observed in the church, in the sacristy, in the vesting room, and in adjacent areas, so that all may dispose themselves to carry out the sacred action in a devout and fitting manner.”—General Instruction of the Roman Missal, 2003, paragraph 45

“To this we would add that silence should also be observed after Mass until one is outside the Church building, both for respect toward the Blessed Sacrament, and toward those members of the faithful who wish to prolong their thanksgiving after Mass.”—Fr. Edward McNamara, Sounds of Silence, January 20, 2004, zenit.org

I am certain that most of us my age or older remember the days when we would not dare talk in Church, outside of the appropriate prayers and responses, and we would not dare play or run or anything apart from those movements that pertained to the Liturgy and our prayer. We did not do these things because our parents, teachers, or “Sister” taught us not to, and threatened punishment otherwise. But it was not only our respect and obedience to them that kept us quiet and well-behaved in Church, but more deeply our respect for God and his dwelling place among us, where Jesus Christ is truly present in the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist.

Is the Church still the place of silence and reverence that it once was? I think we have to say that the answer is No. So why is it not? Has God changed? No. Have we changed? Yes. For the better? I think not... Our lives are full of noisy godlessness. We need God more than ever, and we need to listen to Him more than ever, and the best place to begin that habit of listening to Him is in His own house, in His very Presence, in Church.

To this end, I would like for us to begin anew the practice of Silence in Church before and after Mass and at the other times we are in Church. Together we will offer this practice as a Lenten penance, but then continue the practice as a good new habit through Easter and beyond. Together, we will work to reclaim God's house as a place of prayer, and a sanctuary for us to find communion with Him.

In order to facilitate this:

+ We will leave the doors between the vestibule and the body of the Church closed at all times.

+ We will refrain from visiting one another before or after Mass until we are in the vestibule or outside of the building.

+ When communication must be carried out, it should be done so in a whisper, as to not disturb those who wish to pray.

+ Even when we might be in the Church for practical reasons such as cleaning, decorating, choir practice, trainings, etc., we should refrain from talking more than what is necessary, and leave those conversations and actions that do not pertain to the task at hand outside.

I know this will be difficult for all of us at first. I encourage us to not be afraid of kind fraternal correction, helping each other to be mindful of this new practice. The phrase we will use to remind each other is "Sacred Silence, please."

Also, to help us begin this practice, during the season of Lent there will be no recessional hymn at any of our masses. I and the altar servers will process out in silence, then the congregation departs afterwards, in silence until you reach the vestibule or outside. I encourage us to take full advantage of this newfound silence by returning to the noble practice of a private moment of prayer after Mass; for each individual to make a thanksgiving to God for the gift of the Eucharist, and to pray that they carry out the mission that God gives to them until they return.

I deeply believe that God wants us to do this, and that we need to do this. I know that you too know this to be true. May our prayer and our silence continue to lead us to holiness and to give glory to God in all things.

Saint Peter, pray for us.

Saints Cyril and Methodius, pray for us.

Saint Rose of Lima, pray for us.