

Silence in church:

Creating sacred space
to hear God speak



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DEAR FATHER KERPER: Because of my work schedule, I go to Mass at two different parishes. One is very noisy. People talk to one another about trivial things and most never genuflect or even bow towards the altar. I find it impossible to pray. The other parish is very quiet and their early morning Mass has no music. I find myself wanting to escape the more noisy church. Are there any clear rules about talking in church?

Yes and no. Yes regarding silence during the celebration of Mass. No regarding talking in church.

The rules about silence appear in the Church's official guide for celebrating the Eucharist, which is known as the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM)*.

It has 18 specific references to silence at Mass. In addition, one norm (No. 45) governs everything else:

“Sacred silence also, as part of the celebration, is to be observed at designated times.” Note the words “as part of the celebration.”

This emphasizes that silence is an

integral element of all liturgical worship.

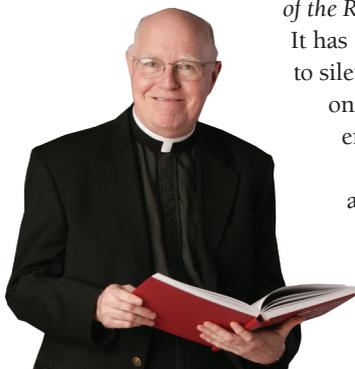
Prayer, especially the Eucharist, must have silence. Prayer is always a dialogue, not a monologue. As such, all the guide's directives create “silent territory” as sacred time and space for God's response to our collective prayer. This “silent territory” includes a few moments during the penitential rite when we remember our sins; time between the biblical readings; an extended time of thanksgiving after we receive Holy Communion; and time for reflection after the homily. The various sectors of this “silent territory” foster a predictable rhythmic exchange between worshippers and the Lord. It goes like this. We speak in public prayer.

The Lord answers in silence. We listen in silence and then respond in silence.

We must now note the single Church norm that goes beyond dialogue to adoration. I refer to the norm that mandates complete silence among the people while the celebrant alone recites the Eucharistic Prayer, which culminates in the consecration.

The silence here promotes interior adoration, not dialogue. Father Joseph Jungmann, the great liturgical historian, explained that the silence of the Eucharistic Prayer invites people to participate in interior adoration of the Lord. This requires an intense focus on the very act of the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. The people's response to this grand mystery must always be awe framed by interior silence, rather than words.

Sad to say, not every parish observes these directives. Living as we do in a fast-paced and noisy world; fewer and fewer people are able to bear much silence. But without plentiful silence within worship, we



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risk never hearing God's quiet response to our prayer.

Now let's deal with "talking in church." The Church norms neither approve nor prohibit it. It states: "Even before the celebration (of Mass) itself, it is commendable that silence 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." Notice the delicate word "commendable." The *General Instruction* "commends" silence but, strictly speaking, does not require it.

Some people, of course, were taught that "talking in church" is always a grave sin. I'm one of them. It started when my mother brought me into a massive church in Philadelphia. It had a large dome inscribed with the words, "Silence in the Presence of God." That divine directive scared me. From then on, I regularly confessed "talking in church" even if I hadn't said a word.

Over time, many factors have produced deeply silent churches with occasional whispers here and there. For sure, the strong emphasis on the eucharistic presence dwelling within the church suppressed chatter. But this tendency toward silence began to wane when church architecture and design moved toward simplicity, bright lights and now even video screens!

For sure, older churches have an "otherworldly" mystique that encourages silence. But we must also remember that silence is not an end in itself. Here's a helpful statement from an eminent commentator on *The Rule of St. Benedict*:

"The goal of monastic silence is not non-talking. The goal of monastic silence ... is respect for others, a sense of place, a spirit of peace."

This applies to parish churches as well. Respect for others includes awareness that they have come into the church to pray quietly. As such, they rightly expect that others will not disturb them by chatter or even loud prayers and private devotions. The commentator also mentions "a sense of place," which means that churches serve specific purposes at specific times.

Is there any common ground between the "talkers" and the "silent ones"?

Yes! Let's look back to the 10th century, the time of the monastic reform based in Cluny, France.

When people visited the huge monastery, they began to describe it as "paradise" — a place of order, care for the poor, fraternal love, balance and God's presence. The world especially admired the monks of Cluny for their silence; but their silence was not an exercise in willpower or a sterile legalistic penance. Rather, Cluny became known as "the paradise of charity."

By combining sound and silence within the eucharistic sacrifice and combining reverence and friendly outreach within our churches, perhaps strangers will begin to see our parishes as "the paradise of charity." ■

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