



SILENCE AND THE MEANING OF THE MASS

by [Bishop Robert Barron](#) · May 30, 2017

Robert Cardinal Sarah's recent book [The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of Noise](#) explores a number of themes both theological and spiritual, all centering around the unhappy role that noise has come to play in our culture and more specifically in the Church. His observations are most trenchant in regard to the liturgy, which should come as no great surprise, given his role as head of the Vatican Congregation devoted to liturgy and sacraments. As I read the sections of his book dealing with the importance of silence during Mass, I often found myself nodding vigorously.

I came of age in the period immediately following the Second Vatican Council, when an enormous stress was placed, quite legitimately, on the conciliar call for "full, conscious, and active participation" in the Mass. That famous phrase, derived from the ground-breaking work of the theologians of the liturgical movement of the early and mid twentieth century, was a clarion call to the laity to assume their rightful role as real actors in the liturgy and not mere spectators. But in its practical application this came too often to imply that the laity must be continually stimulated into action during the Mass: processing, standing, singing, responding, clapping, etc. It was as though the directors and leaders of the liturgy felt they must be constantly grabbing the congregation by the shoulders and shaking them into conscious participation.

Silence, accordingly, tended to be construed as the enemy, for it would lull the people into inattention and boredom. Hardly anyone in the post-conciliar liturgical establishment appreciated that silence could be a sign of heightened, even enraptured, attention on the part of the congregation, a deeply contemplative entry into the mystery of the Mass. And what several decades of this in turn has produced, especially among the young today, is the impression that the Mass is a sort of religiously-themed jamboree, during which our fellowship is celebrated and at which lots and lots of sound is indispensable. I will confess that during many years as a priest, and now as a bishop, I have often wondered whether our hyper-stimulated congregations know exactly what they are participating in. They know that they are active, but active precisely in what?

The Mass is the act by which the Son of God, in union with his mystical body, turns toward the Father in worship. Through our full, conscious, and active participation in this right praise, we become more rightly ordered, more completely configured to Christ and more thoroughly directed toward the Father. We do indeed experience heightened fellowship with one another during the Mass, but this is because we are realizing, not so much our mutual affection, but our common love of a transcendent third, to use Aristotle's language.

In this regard, one of the most illuminating rubrics under which to read the Mass is that of call and response: Christ the head, through the priest who is acting in Christ's person, calls out to the members of his mystical body, and they respond, somewhat in the manner of the lovers in the Song of Songs. At the very commencement of the liturgy, the priest (again, operating not in his own name but *in persona Christi*) says, "The Lord be with you," and the people respond, "and with your spirit." The spirit in question here is the power of Christ dwelling in the priest through the sacrament of Holy Orders. This exchange continues throughout the Mass, Head and members conversing with one another and solidifying their communion. Jesus speaks his Word in the Old Testament readings and in the Pauline epistles, and the members of his body sing back to him in the responsorial psalm; Jesus announces himself in the Gospel, and the people chant back, "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ;" Jesus breaks open the Word through the preaching of the priest, and the people respond with the Creed, a signal of their faith.

Having prepared the gifts (presented by the people), the priest says, "Pray, brothers and sisters, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the Father almighty." This line is of great significance, for it signals the moment when Christ and the members of his body are turning toward the Father in order to perform an act of sacrifice and thanksgiving. How beautifully the Preface to the Eucharistic Prayer expresses this dynamic: "Lift up your hearts!" says Christ to his people; they respond, "We lift them up to the Lord," and then Jesus, through his priest, says, "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God." What follows is the magnificent Eucharistic Prayer, directed toward the Father and prayed by Head and members together, the latter's many sacrifices—small and large—subsumed into the former's definitive sacrifice on the cross. At the conclusion of the liturgy, Christ sends his mystical body, now more perfectly ordered to the Father, back into the world to effect its transformation.

Cardinal Sarah imitates his master Joseph Ratzinger in insisting that silence rightly asserts itself throughout this entire process. The silence of gathering, recollecting, listening, praying, offering, etc. There is plenty of sound in the Mass, but unless silence is cultivated therein as well, we can easily lose sight of what we are doing in this most sublime of prayers.

COMMENTS

12 Comments [Word on Fire](#)

Login ▾

Recommend Tweet Share

Sort by Best ▾



Join the discussion...

LOG IN WITH

OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS


Alan Lipski · 2 years ago

Every now and then I read people are "going through the motions" in the Mass; that they are noticing what others are doing as well. I think that the article hits it right on. We should be silent and reverent from the moment we enter Church. It's that simple. If you find yourself wondering what other people are doing, then the noise is already in your head and your mind isn't where it needs to be. That could be one of the reasons why you are "falling away".

^ | v · [Reply](#) · [Share](#)


Sarah Bjorgaard · 2 years ago

@Tom Mason:

^ | v · [Reply](#) · [Share](#)


Tucson Geek · 2 years ago

I am always amazed when we have periods of silence at mass. I attend a large parish (3000 families) and it is awe inspiring to be in a crowd of 500 or more people at a mass and hear absolute silence. The Triduum services had numerous periods of silence. A haze of incense filled the church and the whole congregation knelt as one for long moments of silent contemplation and prayer. It was very powerful and deeply moving. We need more of this...badly.

^ | v · [Reply](#) · [Share](#)


Tom Mason · 2 years ago

I usually agree with just about everything Bishop Barron says in his articles and youtube videos, but I must take issue this this article. I was stunned when I read this line: "I have often wondered whether our hyper-stimulated congregations know exactly what they are participating in." In my 54 years of life as a Catholic, I have never seen a "hyper-stimulated" congregation. Never. I've been to many different parishes, and what I usually see, sadly, is a large number of people sitting or standing not doing anything. Many people in parishes I've been in do not even say the responses. Very few bother to sing. All it takes is a brief look around the congregation during Mass to confirm what I'm talking about. This is something that many priests are either not noticing or are blinding themselves to. On the occasions when I have attended a protestant service, the opposite is invariable true. People are engaged. People sing...loudly. It is a sad fact that for decades, Catholic parishioners have been going through the motions, and some don't even do that. The Catholic Church is going to have to address this issue and soon. Many parishes have few if any kids attending, even parishes that are attached to schools. This is a tragedy. I live in a city with a huge maga-church. It is filled to the rafters with ex-Catholics. Trust me on this. Many Catholic churches I've been to resemble nursing homes. Young people are not showing up, and their parents are not showing up. Only the grandparents. This is something that the Church must address and address NOW....not 10 or 20 or 50 years from now, as is so often the case with the Church. The Church cannot let the wheels grind slowly on this issue. From the Vatican on down, the Church has to get a handle on this topic before it loses yet another generation of members. I know what I'm talking about, here. I'm one of those cradle-Catholics who left for a while and am trying very hard to come back. But I am sad everytime I attend Mass, no matter where I go, because it's the same thing played out over and over: People going through the motions, and most not even doing that. I don't have any answers to this #1 problem facing the Church, but I do know that the Church must address this NOW and not later. The church is bleeding members, especially young people. Infants are being baptized by young parents (often only to get them into a private Catholic

[see more](#)

^ | v · [Reply](#) · [Share](#)


joan , · 2 years ago

It's all here- please see it. I want to tell you it was that priest who loved our Lord so much I could see his love. This priest would get lost in his love during the consecration, and it was so beautiful. The entire congregation participated in the Mass in one way or another. We had to build a new church because the congregation grew too large for the small church as well referred to it and then we paid off the new church in 3 years. It was that priest. He loved God and it showed. His homilies always included what this thing was in the church and why it was there and what purpose it served and what it was called; or why we did what we did when we did it during the Mass. It was so interesting to go to his Masses, all his Masses were full, and people came from all over the area - 35+ miles away. They had to because the church was located way out of the way in an old mining town not easily accessible by highway. This is what I mean, WORD traveled because of LOVE. He taught so many little things that were so big, and all done in love.

^ | v · [Reply](#) · [Share](#)


Kenneth Ball · 2 years ago

Silence *can* be a sign of heightened attention, but it's more commonly indicative of mindless indifference. Interesting that the Biblical appearances of the Holy Spirit are not accompanied by silence, but tongues and prophesy. Silence has its place, but too many will read your thoughtful article and rationalize a parish environment that suppresses the Spirit's gifts.

^ | v · [Reply](#) · [Share](#)


Tucson Geek · 2 years ago

I attended a Latin mass recently. It was reverent and beautiful but I felt like a spectator and not a participant, as the Bishop mentioned. I love the Novus Ordo because of the active participation. However, I agree that it could use a healthy dose of reverence and silence. It can be conducted beautifully but often isn't. I also agree that many in the pews have no idea what the mass is about. Perhaps some catechesis from the pulpit is in order here. Once you understand the mass, it becomes a transcendent experience that no Protestant service can match, no matter how great the music or engaging the sermon. Ad orientum is another change Cardinal Sarah advocates. Perhaps that should be considered as well. The changes we need are very small and I think we would reap enormous benefits. Perhaps Bishop Barron should bring this up at the next meeting of the USCCB.

^ | v · [Reply](#) · [Share](#)


joan , · 2 years ago

SO BE IT

^ | v · [Reply](#) · [Share](#)


pauline o'callaghan · 2 years ago

I grew up with the celebration of Holy Mass in Latin, and with my missal, I was able to participate completely. I loved the silence and reverence - I knew I was truly at Calvary. Sad to say, unless I want to travel quite a distance every Sunday, I have to attend Mass as it is celebrated everywhere. I attend the very early morning Mass, because there is NO choir, and the congregation is quiet and reverent. On leaving the church when Mass has ended, there is very little conversation. All other Masses are filled with noise, from beginning to end. The only time there is silence, is at the consecration. That is something to be thankful for.

^ | v · [Reply](#) · [Share](#)



FD Cunningham · 2 years ago

Fortunately, I have seen a much greater emphasis on silence over the last few years in the Diocese of Arlington (Virginia). People respond to the opportunity to spend a few minutes in silent reflection on the Eucharist. It is so important for us to be mindful of the Catholics we are losing to meditation paractices. We should lose no one because they "found meditation" outside the church. We are the home of meditation, discernment, reflection, and silence in God's presence!

^ | v · Reply · Share ·



Sarah Bjorgaard · 2 years ago

Oops, pushed send too early! @ Tom Mason: welcome home! I will pray for you as you try to integrate back into the Church and to take up her teaching as your own. I just wanted to say that I'm sorry to hear that you have not seen the life of the Church among the young. My husband and I are a young couple with two children, and our parish is *packed* with young families, young adults, young children... SO many children. It is the silence and reverence of the TLM (an FSSP church in our diocese) that brings them!

^ | v · Reply · Share ·



Maria Soledad Velazquez Garcia · 2 years ago

Totally agree with you but strangely most people don't . As a daily mass goer I can assure you that most people don't really know what goes on. I have suggested to several priests explaining the mass but none have taken me up on it. I feel really sorry for those who "participate" but do not really know what they are participating in.

^ | v · Reply · Share ·

ALSO ON WORD ON FIRE

Advent and the Nature of the Church

1 comment · a month ago

Denizen — <https://www.ncronline.org/n...>

Listening to Jordan Peterson and Sam Harris

16 comments · 14 days ago

Bobo Fett — Bishop Barron and Dr. Jordan Peterson would be a fascinating discussion. Watching two great minds at work in a ...

The Charity of Kristin Lavransdatter

1 comment · 10 days ago

Cheryl Lynn Smith — Beautifully written! When I was a little girl, I used to reflect on the Christ, who was in the least of these. I ...

To Jesus Through Mary? Why Yes, and T'was Ever Thus!

1 comment · a month ago

baguiobroom — Big thank you for this , Elizabeth Scalia!

Subscribe Add Disqus to your siteAdd DisqusAdd Disqus' Privacy PolicyPrivacy PolicyPrivacy