

Reflective Silence (Letting Loose the Power of God's Word)

Imagine Jesus in the synagogue speaking the Word of God contained in the Hebrew scriptures. He expects those gathered to absorb what he has just spoken, that those early Jewish worshippers would really ponder what he has just spoken to them; that it will resonate with those present and have some impact on their lives. 2000 years ago, keeping silence was a much easier practice than it is today with all the distractions confronting us in a media-saturated world, where we cannot go one minute without checking the latest headline or tweet on our cellphone. So much so, that it even has affected the pace of our liturgy, our worship.

Our society is so badgered by a constant flow of words and actions that there is little time to absorb what we have either just heard, seen or experienced. Sometimes, I wonder what it would be like, if Jesus were speaking today in some public forum, especially in our churches.

Most of us have heard of the frequent use or call for a “moment of silence” in public gatherings as a way of reflecting upon something important that has occurred. Certainly, in the life of the Church, there are similar occasions that call for moments of silence to reflect on something important. This is especially true within our main public gathering, the Mass, especially in hearing the Word of God proclaimed. So much so, the Church has prescribed in its guidance for celebrating the Mass the need for silence to allow the assembly to reflect upon what the people have just heard.

The General Instruction to the Roman Missal (GIRM) that provides the guidance on the celebration of our liturgy calls direct attention to the issue of silence in our Liturgy of the Mass. Article 45 of the instruction states generally the need for and benefit of silence in our liturgy. One of the important segments of the Mass where silence is a significant component is the Liturgy of the Word, where silence is expected to be longer and theologically richer.

More specifically, Article 56 of the GIRM states: “The Liturgy of the Word is to be celebrated in such a way as to promote meditation, and so any sort of haste that hinders recollection must be clearly avoided. During the Liturgy of the Word, it is also appropriate to include periods of silence, accommodated to the gathered assembly, in which, at the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the word of God may be grasped by the heart and a response through prayer may be prepared. It may be appropriate to observe such periods of silence, for example, before the Liturgy of the Word itself begins, after the first and second reading and lastly, at the conclusion of the homily.”

While the Church has called attention to silence as a very important element in the Liturgy of the Word, unfortunately, it is often omitted or observed so briefly as to be useless. What is needed here is a lengthy period to allow the Word to sink in and take root. What the General Instruction prescribes is one full minute, perhaps even two. Can you imagine that in today's fast-paced world? But, we cannot ignore it, if we are to respect the Word of God spoken to us.

This guidance regarding silence was an important factor in our recent special review of our weekend Masses. **From this review, a recommendation was made and approved for appropriate periods of silence in the Liturgy of the Word. This would be consistent with the Church's instruction, highlighted above. To further enhance this call for moments of undistracted silence, you will notice a somewhat different practice in the movement of ministers involved in the Word. The pause after each reading will be somewhat extended. After this extended pause for reflection, the organ music will prompt the ministers to move together to their prescribed places. This will happen after the first and second readings. Similarly, a silent pause is included in our Prayer of the Faithful, the prayer that is the conclusion to the Liturgy of the Word. A pause of silence after the homily is also prescribed.**

We hope that these moments of silence will not only add to the importance of what is being proclaimed, but be an opportunity for each of us to absorb more deeply the speaking of Christ to our minds and hearts. Truly, in these moments “silence is golden.”