



What has happened to the time for Private Prayer at Mass?

What has happened to the time for private prayer at Mass? Some would say that in today's liturgies there is rarely a moment in the entire Mass when there is not someone speaking or singing.

Some of us remember the time, prior to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, when almost the entire Mass seemed to be a time of private prayer for the congregation. The Mass was in Latin and much of it voiced by the priest softly with his back to the people. Unless a person had a missal containing a translation of the Latin, the Mass was largely unintelligible. There were no responses for the people. The servers were the designated responders. Even at a "high" Mass where the parts of the Mass were sung, the choir sang these, not the congregation. Many of us spent our time at Mass praying the rosary or other devotional prayers. There certainly was plenty of time for private prayer.

The liturgical reforms of Vatican II moved us toward an understanding of our role at liturgy that was not one of spectator or attendee, but one of participator, the ones who do it. By definition, all celebrations of liturgy are communal prayer, the Body of Christ celebrating with Christ our Head. Even when there are only a few of us gathered, liturgy is the prayer of the whole church, the Communion of Saints, heaven and earth joined together.

Two characteristics of the liturgy confirm this communal nature: the plural language and the dialogical form. Listen carefully to the priest celebrant as he prays. He only uses the plural form: "we," "us" not a personal "I" or "me." Even when the Mass was in Latin, the texts were inclusive, e.g. "*Oremus*," let us pray. "*Pater noster*," our Father.

The dialogical form also attests to the communal nature of the liturgy. The priest, deacon or other minister gives out the first part of the dialogue and the rest of the assembly responds. Some examples of this dialogue that require responses from the assembly are: "The Lord be with you" of the greetings, "through Christ our Lord" at the conclusion of prayer, "The word of the Lord" after the readings, "Lift up your hearts" in the Eucharistic Prayer, and "The Body of Christ" before the reception of Communion.

Most of us appreciate the reforms of the liturgy that have allowed the scripture readings and the prayers of the Mass to be in the language of the people. Today we take for granted our inclusion in singing the parts of the Mass and in the responses and prayer texts. But did the reforms of the Second

Vatican Council take away the opportunity for private prayer? Not at all.

The Mass, although fundamentally communal prayer, has many locations within it that provide the opportunity and encouragement for a period of private prayer. Take the Communion Rite, for example.

Many of us who grew up before the reforms of the liturgy had a very private notion of Communion reception. The music, soft and introspective, supported this perception. Even though the instructions for Mass had directed us to place a period of silent prayer after Communion, this period, for one reason or another has diminished, almost to the point of nonexistence. Some of us have tried to hold on to this by returning to our places after Communion and attempting to pray privately. This frequently leads to frustration since there is the expectation of participation in the Communion song.

The challenge for parishes today is to reestablish these two distinct aspects of this ritual action of the Mass: the communal aspect of the procession and distribution of Holy Communion and the private aspect of the period of silence after the distribution. Honoring both aspects requires treating each with the importance it deserves.

In your parishes you will begin to see more attention given to this distinction. The procession to Communion, the standing posture while all the assembly receives, the gestures of reverence, and the singing of the Communion Song all support the understanding that this act of receiving Holy Communion is the communal act par excellence of the Mass. This portion of the rite is not intended to be the time for private prayer.

However, there is a time especially set aside for private prayer. The new instruction clarifies this, "After the distribution of Holy Communion the priest and the faithful spend some time in private prayer." At this time we sit or kneel for an extended period of silence. This is not a time for cleaning up or moving about. The lack of ritual action during this period contributes to the establishment of a period of time for silent reflection, prayer and praise of God in our hearts.

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