



‘Sacred silences’ part of attentiveness in celebrating the Mass

“Why didn’t anyone tell me that before?” is a frequent response by Catholics after a question-and-answer session on the Mass. Most people just want to know “why” we do or say what we do. In this article and others in the coming weeks, some of these “whys” will be addressed.

The Second Vatican Council emphasized the importance of full, conscious and active participation of the faithful in the liturgy as the “aim to be considered before all else.” This focus on the participation of all the people was intended to restore a sense of ownership in the action of the liturgy. In the previous centuries the perception was that the Mass belonged to the priest. The priest celebrated Mass and the people attended as silent spectators.

Today, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* responds to the query, “Who celebrates the liturgy? It is the whole Body of Christ with Christ our Head that celebrates the liturgy.”

Unfortunately over the years, most efforts have focused very narrowly on loud singing as the response to this dictum. Full, conscious and active participation, however, means much more than congregational participation in the music.

This level of participation requires attentiveness that includes listening to God’s word proclaimed in the Scriptures and dialogue with the priest celebrant and other liturgical ministers. It includes praying the texts of the Mass with the rest of the assembly and, yes, singing those psalms, hymns and Mass parts as well. Attentiveness is the key, being present to all parts of the liturgy, even in the sacred silences of the Mass.

The new *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* contains the majority, though not all, of the directives for the celebration of the Mass. In this revised document there is a new emphasis on the periods of silence in the liturgy.

Although there have been a number of specific locations in the liturgy where “silence” was recommended, this new emphasis is noteworthy. The descriptions of the periods of sacred silence indicate their significance for the people’s participation in the Mass.

For example, there are two locations in the Introductory Rite of the Mass that call for periods of silence within them: the Act of Penitence and the Opening Prayer.

Let’s take a closer look at the Opening Prayer, called the “Collect.” This prayer begins with the priest celebrant giving the invitation, “Let us pray.” The *General Instruction* indicates there is to be a period of silence following this invitation.

The purpose of this period of silence is “so that all may be conscious of the fact that they are in God’s presence and may formulate their petitions mentally.” This silent period takes on a heightened importance for the engagement of the people in this communal prayer. Between the invitation to pray and the priest praying the Collect prayer, the rest of the people have something to do. This is the time that each person brings his or her hopes, joys and concerns to mind to be included in this prayer.

Then the priest, addressing God the Father, “collects” the people’s prayers by summing up the character of the celebration. The people, uniting themselves to this entreaty, make the prayer their own with an “Amen.”

This Sunday when the priest gives the invitation, “Let us pray,” let us do just that. Let us all bring to mind our intentions that we wish to present to God in prayer this day. This joining of our hopes, joys, sorrows and concerns engages us more fully, actively, and consciously in this celebration of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.