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Pastoral Perspectives on Silence in Church

One of the more frequent concerns expressed by many Catholics is level of

‘Ramsowo, kościół, modlitwa’ by Adam Kliczek Licensed under [CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons](#)

talking and other noise in churches in recent decades. Many of us who are a bit older remember a time when to walk even into a rather full Church was to walk into a realm of great silence. People just didn't talk in church. One would enter, find their pew, genuflect, and then kneel for private prayer before Mass began. When Mass concluded, one might kneel for a brief while for prayer, but then leave quietly, not talking until in the vestibule or outside the church. Even most masses were all but whispered by the priest. I even remember as a child that in the examination of conscience we used, "talking in church" was listed among the sins to be confessed.

Obviously, in most parishes, the days of strict silence are all but gone. The change is not just in churches, but to some extent is in the wider culture as well. I remember also as a child, rather strict ushers going up and down the aisles of movie houses enforcing silence. When one entered the courtroom, one was expected to maintain silence. And

even in more formal concert settings, like at the Kennedy Center, one would often see signs as you entered the concert hall: “Silence.”

Most of this is gone now both in the Church, and in our modern culture, so dominated by informality at almost every level. Americans are almost never formal, almost never dress-up, nor do we observe most other formalities we used to, like silence. So our loud churches, bespeak both cultural and ecclesial trends.

Legitimately, many Catholics ask if there are to be no limits. As sound levels after Mass reach “cafeteria- like” proportions, many ask their pastors to please make announcements, and somehow enforce silence before and after mass.

Generally, most requests go unheeded, leading many Catholics to bemoan the lack of clerical leadership or the enforcement of any discipline within the Church. Such complaints are not wholly out of line, and these are in fact the days when clerical leadership is often lacking in many areas.

However, the lack of enforced silence may not be in fact simply a lack of leadership. Many pastors seek to balance competing and legitimate goods when it comes to the matter of silence in churches. Perhaps it is good to review a few of the competing issues, all good in themselves, that seem to hang in the balance when it comes to this question. Let’s look at them one by one.

1. Koinonia – In Acts 2:42 are described the four pillars of the Catholic life: *They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to*

fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And hence we note a very Catholic vision of the life of the early Christians. There is devotion (not a mere dabbling) in the Apostolic teaching which includes both Scripture and Tradition. There is the “breaking of the bread” i.e. the Eucharist and, by extension, the whole of the sacramental life. There is prayer, both private and public, devotional and liturgical. Finally there is “fellowship.” The Greek word here is *κοινωνία* (*koinonia*), a word that is a noun referring literally to “what is shared in.” By extension it means: contributory help, participation, communion, or spiritual fellowship.

While the expression and experience of *koinonia* has varied over the centuries, it remains one of the four pillars of the Christian life as denoted in Acts 2:42. And while it is true, as we have commented here before, that there are many excessive flourishes justified in the the name of “community,” the solution to the modern problem of a self enclosed, self-referential, and anthropocentric expression of “community” is not to banish the concept, but to balance it.

And while strict silence in churches may have its appeal, there are legitimate concerns raised by enforcing it today as we shall see, since it may be in tension with legitimate concerns for the communal nature of Sunday Mass. Hence, point two.

2. The church as a place of prayer. Other things being equal, one of the first things one associates the church building with is prayer! And thus, one rightly expects the church building to be a place that in fact *does* encourage and foster prayer.

However, there are different types of prayer. There is public, liturgical prayer, and there is private devotional prayer.

As a general rule, especially on Sunday and other designated Mass times, the parish church is not a private chapel, but rather, is first and foremost a place of public prayer where the faithful gather as a group. The church is usually large, to accommodate numerous people, and it has pews or benches (not usually personal chairs and kneelers), where people, sitting in groups, with their clergy orient 😊 themselves in such a way as to foster the communal worship of God.

And while there are often separate shrines and chapel areas, the main purpose of the church is together a large number of people together, so that they may worship and praise God together. Sunday morning, especially, is it time for communal, rather than private prayer. And though private devotional prayer is essential and required for every Catholic, that is not the main focus of Sunday morning or of the main nave of the church.

To be avoided is an attitude which might say something like, “I go to church on Sunday to pray to God, not to be bothered by other people.” No, Sunday morning is a day of communal prayer to God. Even in relatively quiet parishes, there are going to be crying babies, the sound of shuffling feet, coughs and sneezes, and any number of things.

One of the concerns therefore the pastors face in fielding request to enforce stricter silence is that the concept of

community as we saw in point one, and communal prayer is an important value to inculcate and balance with which the concept of strict silence. Frankly *koinonia*, is in some tension with strict silence among the faithful. People who are together tend to talk, at least at certain moments, such as greeting one another.

Keeping the church with an atmosphere conducive to private prayer, while a good value, is not the first and most essential focus of Sunday morning in the Catholic Parish. Rather, it is to provide an atmosphere conducive to the gathering of God's people, so that they may together turn their worship and praise to Him. This will necessarily involve noise, setting up, some announcements, directions, the singing of hymns and prayers etc.

3. The presence of the Most Blessed Sacrament – It is a frequently given reason that the presence of the Lord in the Tabernacle should command a silent reverence from us. And historically this response was widespread.

However, some also argue that Jesus enjoyed company, and attended many parties, sometimes with a rather rough and unrefined crowd. And hence, we can also exhibit some interaction in church and that this would not necessarily displease him.

There is a humorous story told to me once on retreat wherein:

A young Italian couple went to their parish priest and said that they were poor and could not afford to rent a hall. Might they use the parish courtyard for a brief reception after the

wedding? The Pastor graciously agreed.

But on the day of the wedding heavy rains made the use of the courtyard impossible. So the request was made if perchance they could use the back of the church, just for a “brief” reception. They promised to keep the noise down and only drink “a little” wine. The pastor reluctantly agreed.

But, as is often the case, the wine flowed in abundance and the volume increased. The wine flowed some more, and the volume went up some more!

The pastor was now fuming in the sacristy and about to go and throw them out when his neighboring priest and friend came by. He inquired as to the anger of the pastor who replied, “Listen to all the noise they are making, and in the house of God, Don Camillo! And they are drinking much wine!” “Ah, but Father, they are a poor couple and it is raining. They had to use your church. Besides, Jesus went to loud weddings and made wine in abundance. Surely he understands!”

The pastor responded, “I know that! You don’t need to quote the bible to me! I know Jesus went to loud weddings and I know they drank wine! You don’t need to tell me all that! But there, they did not have the Blessed Sacrament present!”

😊 Lots of Christological layers going on in that parable!

And though we ought to avoid behaving in the Church of God in

ways that take no notice of the Lord's presence in the tabernacle, it does not follow that Jesus is offended that the members of his body enjoy the company of one another.

Here again, balance is required between *koinoina* and devotional prayer that recognizes the presence of the Lord in the Tabernacle in a posture of silent adoration.

4. The nature of human dynamics. When it comes to the level of noise, it is a common experience that noise levels gradually increase, in large human gatherings. As background noise begins to increase, people talk louder in order to be heard. This further increases the overall noise level, and the volume continues to go up and up.

Some years ago in elementary school I remember that the teachers would sometimes put the lights out in the lunch room to call us to silence. We would then be asked to be more quiet, and the volume levels the “reset” to a lower level. But gradually, for the reasons stated, they began to go back up again. Off the lights would go again. The rebukes from the teachers were issued, “Talk more quietly!” And things quieted down, but then went back up, the cycle repeated.

Alas, it seems to be the human condition. And, the acoustics of many churches don't help. Even subdued talking in the back, as ushers greet and instruct the faithful, echoes and create a lot of background volume, causing other people to talk louder etc.

Hence without very strict rules, forbidding all talking, volume

levels are going to tend to increase when some modest conversation is allowed. Perhaps in such a settings, the best a pastor can do is to give gentle reminders to the people to speak quieter and less. But even with momentary moderation in the volume of noise in churches, the volume will go up over time for the reasons stated.

5. General cultural shifts and expectations. If, the only real solution is the strict enforcement of silence, this sort of solution tends to run afoul of cultural expectations, when it comes to parish life today. Like it or not, there is an expectation that parish communities should be places where people are welcomed, and where there is a “warm, friendly and courteous” atmosphere.

We’ve already discussed that there are cultural shifts in America involved here. And while many of us who are older may remember a time when things were more disciplined or orderly, from our perspective, those days are now largely gone.

Most pastors do not want their parish church to be identified as a place where people are harshly rebuked, and warned to avoid any conversation or human interaction that might make noise. And while some might praise a certain parish church for its quiet reverence, most pastors are aware that the current culture tends to favor a more casual, open, “warm and friendly” setting.

And while some who read this may lament this fact, it is hard to deny that this is the kind of culture we largely have today.

However, it seems very legitimate to suggest that things are currently out of balance in this regard. But to ask one pastor, or parish to take on the whole culture in this regard may not always be realistic, and pastors *do* legitimately struggle how to find ways to keep the noise levels lower, without offending against notions of community today.

5. The role of certain specific cultural settings. Many of us, who come from a Northern European cultural stock, often identify silence with reverence, and reverence with silence. For us, it is a no-brainer.

But for people from many other cultures, the identification of silence with reverence is not so obvious. In the African-American community, (to include also Africans of Caribbean and Continental origin), warmth and hospitality are very important and intertwine with reverence. Lively praise and worship are also considered a high form of reverence.

The idea of sitting silently in the church, with a rather serious look on one's face, seems somewhat irreverent in such settings. God is to be praised joyfully. My neighbor is to be greeted. To be reverent is to celebrate, to be overtly joyful. In settings like this, the European expression of reverence often seems to be “sour-faced Saints” or perhaps the expression of one who has recently suffered the death of a loved one.

The general understanding of reverence in these settings is that God is worthy of our highest and most joyful praise.

Further, in the Black churches the thought of entering and *not greeting* your fellow parishioners seems strange. As a general rule African American culture is more extroverted and has thus embraced the current cultural trends to be more effusive in the house of the Lord.

I know less of Latino culture, but there seem to be similar experiences there.

Say what you will about which approach might be best, but the fact is there are very different cultural experiences at work in what we call reverence. This is not just another form of relativism, for relativism regards matters of truth. That God is to be revered cannot be set aside. But *how* this is expressed does vary. Some do so by quiet solemnity. Others by joyful exuberance.

Both sorts of reverence are spoken of in the Bible. At times, Jewish and early Christian worship are described there as rather noisy affairs. At other times there are references to bent knees and bowed heads.

Thus, when there are requests that “Father do something about all the talking and noise” many pastors are conflicted. There *IS* a value to preserving greater quiet in our parish churches, especially before Mass, and encouraging prayer. But cultural trends and differences do exist and they are not all bad.

Koinonia is a pillar of Church life. Helping Catholics to meet and forge relationships in Christ is to be encouraged. One might wish that this

took place outside the church building, but practically, inside is when most of the people are together and seek each other out.

And the conversation isn't all frivolous. There are concerns expressed, and significant news shared. There are prayer requests and invitations made to important gatherings and meetings in the parish etc. And yes, there is also banter of a less edifying sort.

Perhaps the best that Pastors can do to remind the faithful occasionally to balance the virtue of fellowship with the respect for the fact that there is also a place for private prayer after, and especially *before* Mass. Silence is more reasonably expected when entering the Mass. After Mass it is just going to be more difficult to expect it in most places, given culture and the legitimate need for communal fellowship.

I suspect there will be strong opinions in the combox. I will largely refrain from interjecting much to give you all the chance. I *DO* ask for you to consider mutual charity, whatever your preference. There are legitimate concerns for the volume of noise in most parishes. But there are also other things in the balance. This is what I mean by the title "Pastoral perspectives" At least consider this much, that Pastors have a lot on their minds when it comes to taking a stand on this issue. There are many legitimate things they must balance. Please avoid vitriol, ridicule and adding more heat than light. *Amor suprema lex.*