



# Catechesis For the Masses

Basic Teachings on Liturgy and Participation in the Mass in Both Forms.

## Part 7: The Sound of Silence in the Liturgy

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♦ ♦ ♦ **A**nd after fire a still small voice.  
And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him...” (1Kings 19:12-13).

The encounter of Elijah with God at Mount Horeb is both mysterious and very personal. The encounter happens after Elijah’s forty day and forty night walk in fleeing from Israel, having just slain the prophets of Baal and incurred the want for vengeance by Jezebel. In the moment itself, several notable natural forces occur: strong winds, an earthquake, and fire. In none of these forces does Elijah encounter God. Rather, it is in the “still small voice” that he perceives God’s presence with him, which leads him to hide his face in fear. On one level, it appears quite clear that God’s approaching Elijah in the small voice (rather than the very notable natural phenomena) is a means of being near to Elijah without causing him to fear. However, the very opposite takes place as Elijah fears the voice and appears to think nothing of the far more notable occurrences of the moment. Yet, there is more to this encounter than simply the way that it happened - as such an encounter can only take place in one who is disposed to such, able to perceive God in that which is miniscule or seemingly as inconsequential as a small voice would be in the aftermath of far noisier and more perceivable events.

Accordingly do we talk about the role of silence in worship. Mindful of principles of worship already explored (that the liturgy is God’s work on our behalf; that our participation in this work is less about

doing and more about being; and that such participation is primarily in the realm of our interior disposition ahead of external expression), the reality of God making his presence known in ways of silence or what is very miniscule has the effect of being receivable to those who are rightly disposed for such. That we might more fully recognize the power of silence in the Mass, might we approach it from two directions: 1) that of the silences found within the ritual itself, and 2) the ways that our own practice of silence opens us to a greater encounter with Christ.

### 1 - Moments of Silence within the Rituals for Mass.

As we are seeking to learn about the offering of the Mass in both the Ordinary Form and the Extraordinary Form, it is important that we are clear that both forms of Mass contain particular moments that call for silence so that the faithful may be lead to a more personal encounter with Christ. In the Ordinary Form Masses, silence is encouraged at multiple moments toward aiding the faithful in their interior prayer and meditation. In particular, the moments for the acknowledgement of sin during the Penitential Act, the silence after the priest says “Let us pray” to introduce the Collect (or in what has been called the “opening prayer”), the brief times of silence after the first and second readings, and a time of silence after Holy Communion are meant to invite deeper individual prayer and reflection, that Christ may speak to each person individually, offering each a more personal encounter. At other moments in the Ordinary Form, silence may be less noticeable; however, from the fact that throughout the Mass there are times when the words of one person are to be heard while

all others present are united in their silence (as during the readings or as the priest is praying the Eucharistic Prayer) are no less significant in seeing the deliberate silence of the many as conducive to all who are present being able to unite in a single prayer or moment of meditation - thus opening all to an encounter with God.

In the Extraordinary Form Mass, and in particular in the offering of the “Low Mass,” silence is frequently the predominant feature. In fact,

many of essential prayers of the priest are to be prayed in a low voice - for as he is offering the prayers to God Himself, it is less pertinent that all the people hear the prayers and more important that they are united to the priest in their silent reverence and offering of self to God in union with the priest. Of special note is the Eucharistic prayer, which is almost entirely offered “in a low voice” by the priest. Additionally, in many places the responses to be made are said by only the altar servers - as they represent all of the people who are present in offering the verbal responses for the good of all. While such silence at times may appear to prevent the people from a fuller participation, when considered in reference to Elijah’s encounter, might we reconsider that such silent waiting and perceiving of what is perceptible both opens us to encounter Christ more peacefully and more easily leads us to remain reverent toward He who comes to us - leading us to the second consideration....

**2 - How Silence Opens Us to a Deeper Encounter.**

As it is our “interior” participation that is primary in worship, silence logically follows as an essential element of proper participation. By first acknowledging the silences of our own interior meditation, along



*Elijah shields his face in fear as he perceives the Lord's presence in the small whispering sound. Our own receptivity to God's presence is strengthened through times of silence, as the Lord can speak to our heart in otherwise imperceptible ways through silence and stillness.*

with our awareness of our interior joys, struggles, or longings the we sense, we can then acknowledge how God speaks to us in these very joys, struggles, and longings. If worship were only about our outward expressions, our capacity for true receptivity would be reduced if not all together lost, as such focus on the external easily degrades the act of worship being only about ourselves. However, as worship primarily is an interior act, such realities at times of deliberate silence (when there is neither sound nor movement, keeping all in stillness) rightly provide for the opportunity for He that desires to draw us to Himself in ways of peace and love to come - even in the smallest voice speaking to our hearts. In other words, filling every moment with something to say, hear, or do cancels out real opportunity to meet the Lord in a still and small manner after the likeness of Elijah’s encounter. Therefore, practicing silence, no matter which form of the Mass we are worshipping within, as well as in our personal prayer, is essential - that God Himself may speak to us according to our interior dispositions to receive Him in whatever place we may be on the journey.

Do not fear the times of silence - as it is in these types of moments the Lord may will to speak to you in the most powerful of ways.