

# CrossCurrents *A Catholic Reflects on Faith in Our Times*

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## Noisy Catholicism?

**George Weigel has done it again--just in time for Lent!** He has turned a perfectly sensible appeal for silent reflection and prayer during Lent into a rant aimed at a variety of Catholics whose behavior he deplors.

Liturgists and organists whose prayers, songs, or organ solos produce “all noise, all the time”; children, described as “squawking (twice),” “crying,” “fussing,” “fractious (twice),” and “caterwauling”; worshipers, whom he scolds for “chattering” before mass, “chattering” after the recessional “chattering” during the exchange of peace, “chattering with friends” while entering church, “chattering with neighbors” while leaving church—all these people become targets of George’s ire.

He argues that American culture now surrounds us with noise, citing airports filled with “TSA announcements, airline announcements, airport announcements, muzak, and the ubiquitous CNN-airport channel”—plus “squawking” children, loud conversations, and passengers yelling at cell phones. He concludes:

*There is virtually no public space, outside art museums and courtrooms, where our aural senses are not under assault....Churches should be different.*

Weigel gets no quarrel from me about the American “noise culture.” As I write this, while taking public transit, a woman six rows behind me is conversing with her cell phone loud enough to be heard six rows in front of me. Her private business (a medical update) is now public knowledge.

I often find myself struggling to hear or be heard in restaurants because the piercing voices of diners four tables away are drowning me out. I feel a bit obsolescent recalling my parents saying one should lower one’s voice in public (compared to home) to preserve others’ comfort as well as one’s own privacy,—but I agree with Weigel that environments free from “noise” are increasingly rare.

I also half-agree that “churches should be different.” As sacred spaces reserved for sacred activities, it makes sense for churches to offer opportunities to escape the “noise culture” of the outside world. But I disagree with Weigel’s view that churches fail in this.

He argues, for example that “contemporary American noise culture has invaded and distorted” the traditional silence in our churches. Yet, as someone who visits churches for a living, I do not recall seeing “ubiquitous” closed-circuit TV in churches, or hearing a steady string of public service or security announcements, or muzak, or loud conversations, or cell phone use (except accidental). Most of the time, I find Catholic churches a reliable source of refreshing peace and quiet.

Most of the time, that is, except a few hours per week, when people gather for liturgy. Then, of course, a church’s sacred space is transformed by that distinct sacred moment – Mass – of which we all become the assembled celebrants. Then, it is true, the church is filled with a variety of sounds: talk, singing, instruments, praying, preaching, etc.

Does this mean that Mass-time has been invaded by “the contemporary American noise culture”? Hardly!

In fact, the “noises” Weigel describes at church are either ancient (babies crying, people singing and praying) or else date from the liturgical reforms of Vatican II (congregants praying parts of the Mass aloud, speaking at the sign of peace, conversing before and after Mass, singing, even applauding). Everything Weigel complains about was quite commonplace in the churches I knew in the late 1960s and 1970s – well before TSA, CNN, and cell phones.

So why does Weigel cite one set of cultural symptoms to critique an unrelated set of church practices? Because, I suspect, his real target is liturgical reform itself – at least, reform as it has developed over the last 45 years. And here the key issue is whether our churches *should* be places of silence, not just the 95% of the time when Mass is *not* being celebrated, but even during the few hours per week when people gather for Mass itself.

Certainly there are moments during every Mass – no matter how vibrant and lively – when silence is called for. Such moments are in fact designated in the Church’s General Instruction of the Roman Missal. There are also moments when the majority of worshipers are silent because they are listening to a scripture reading, a prayer text, a homily, or music. No one can dispute that silence should be, and in fact is, a part of Mass.

But moments of absolute silence are relatively rare and brief, and the assembled congregation is expected to actively participate with the presiding priest and other liturgical ministers by praying aloud or singing more than two dozen times during Mass. Add in greetings of peace, possible responses to questions, and greetings to others before and after Mass, and the time for breaking the silence heavily outweighs the times for keeping it.

Weigel seems to find some conflict between the desire that Mass preserve solemn reverence and the tendency of contemporary Masses to be loud. But neither solemnity nor reverence requires silence. A Bach chorale might drown out any noise typical at Mass, yet no one would deny it is unfailingly reverent.

Then why complain about a lack of silence in church at Mass times? I suspect the clue is in Weigel's comment that silence is "a way to ensure that you actually get a chance to pray yourself"—as if one only prays when left alone in peace and quiet. In this view, Weigel speaks for many Catholics who simply want to be left alone at Mass.

In fact, I am convinced Weigel uses "silence" as a code word for "private time and space." And certainly, our spiritual life as Catholics can always benefit from more of that—especially as an antidote to our "noise culture."

The trouble is, if one wants peace and quiet be alone with the Lord, Mass is neither the time nor the place to seek such privacy. As Vatican II made unmistakably clear:

*Liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations of the Church, which is the "sacrament of unity," namely, a holy people united and organized under their bishops...Therefore liturgical services pertain to the whole body of the Church...Communal celebration is to be preferred...to the celebration that is individual and quasi-private.*

Vatican II, CONSTITUTION ON THE SACRED LITURGY, #26.

The key here is "communal celebration." We gather together at Mass, not as random individuals seeking to pray by ourselves, but as a faithful *community* assembled to offer a *communal* celebration of the Eucharist which signifies and

expresses our *communion* with Christ, his Father, his Spirit, and each other.

I realize different people have different personal preferences for different styles of liturgy: short vs. long; organ hymns vs. popular music with modern instruments; large ornate spaces vs. simpler smaller ones.

But the real issue here is not personal preference; it is the nature of liturgy itself. Mass is not a time for private prayer. It is, by definition, the *public worship* that we, the Church, offer our God.

Those who prefer private prayer time with God would do better to come back some other time. Catholic tradition is rich with personal devotions and prayers, and an empty church is not hard to find these days. To insist on privacy during Mass implies one does not want a communal celebration at all.

I vividly recall the days when priests at my Jesuit high school each celebrated Mass silently and alone at one of the twenty private altars in the school chapel. I also recall the good ladies who whiled away every Sunday Mass silently saying their rosaries. These were good Catholic people, and enjoyed their time alone with God. But their timing was badly off.

Mass is not something *I do alone* – it is something *we do together*. When we do, we experience sacred time and sacred space in our church, not because we keep quiet, but because by gathering together we celebrate Christ's presence among us:

*Christ is always present in His Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass ...especially under the Eucharistic species...He is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church. He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings, for He promised: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20)*

Vatican II, CONSTITUTION ON THE SACRED LITURGY, #7.

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