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# Silence allows us to contemplate our God

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JOURNEY TOWARD HOLINESS

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At an Easter Vigil recently, I watched with amazement an infant girl, a pre-walker, perhaps six months old. She was in the first pew with a family receiving sacraments. During the entire three-hour service she did not cry or sleep or eat! She made faces with the closest young server, happily moved from lap to lap, watched everything, and smilingly interacted with everyone.

Now that's a born extrovert! But I wonder: will she have trouble with our Catholic style of faith? Will she have trouble being comfortable with silence and stillness and solitude? These things are woven into Catholic spirituality and essential to our Catholic journey to holiness. Let's take a look at why.

What we mean by the word "God" is the starting point for why silence is essential to Catholicism. "Show us the Father," the apostles pleaded. Jesus answered: "No one knows the Father except the Son." This is only one example where scripture reveals that Ultimate Reality or the Ground of all Being is beyond our human thoughts. Therefore in our theology we have something called negative (or apophatic) theology. Negative theology means that our statements about God are so incomplete, because of the limits of our human reason, that they must be contradicted (negated) immediately. In the year 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council put it this way: Between Creator and creature no similitude can be expressed without implying an even greater dissimilitude. For example, if we say that God is Father, we must quickly add but not like human fatherhood. If we say God is Creator, we add, but not like every creator we know that has a beginning. God is love, we say, but in a preeminent manner — a divine love that is different from the love we know. So words about God like Father, Creator, and Love are analogous: they are words we understand from our human experience that point toward but do not capture the reality of who God is.

This fundamental appreciation of how incompletely we know God leads to silence, awe, and contemplation. When we reach the limits of our capacity to reason, the only remaining path is receptivity to

whatever understanding God may give. Augustine contrasted *Scientia* (knowledge attained by reason) with *Sapientia* (knowledge as wisdom, receptive to what God offers it). Contemplation is a deep foundational element of our Catholic faith and heritage. Contemplation as a practice, and contemplative saints and spiritual writers, are almost as old as Christianity, itself. Contemplation is the silence of our souls before the mystery of God.

So important is this contemplative spiritual stance that within the celebration of Eucharist there are required moments of silence. And we who are laity, as we celebrate Eucharist, are in a receptive mode. A liturgist Bishop I knew once used a stop watch to time all the words spoken by laity at a typical Sunday Mass; it was less than five minutes! We are receivers at liturgy, wisdom seekers, listeners. We are entering into a meeting with God, and words like "Glory to God" and "Holy, Holy, Holy" and "Blessed be the Lord" express the limits of our understanding. Unfortunately we do little, as far as I can see, to teach about all this, and so tragically young people, and others not so young, sometimes leave our Catholic worship to find a more entertaining public liturgy.

It is important to end by saying that, although we may not know God with the kind of knowledge Christ has, we can know God from within our own capacity. God is a revealing God, and by that we don't just mean scripture. God also reveals Himself to us through the natural world, through what we discover and name truth, through human experiences like love, and especially through our relationship with Jesus. Who has seen me, has seen the Father. We may not be able to encompass God, but God encompasses us. Contemplation brings us to the experience of union.

Horizon is an image used by the late 20th century theologian Bernard Lonergan. We walk toward God, seeking always greater understanding, the way we might walk in silent awe toward a beautiful horizon at dawn. We draw closer but can never grasp or capture the beauty we see.

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