

My friends in Christ, as Lent begins, we find in today's Gospel text from Saint Mark that the Lord is in the desert, "and He remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan." Now, as we find both in Saint Matthew and in Saint Luke, Satan tempted Jesus at the *end* of those forty days. So that, *before* Satan even entered the scene, Jesus was all alone...in the desert...for well over a month.

Now, I have been to all kinds of deserts in my life. One particularly desert-like landscape in my experience was a national monument in south-central Idaho called "Craters of the Moon." It is such a barren wasteland there, hundreds of square miles of nothing but lava rock and dust and ash; and there is not even much *sound* going on there – *maybe*, whenever the wind blows, one might hear the wind blowing, but because there are no trees or shrubs or *anything* alive there, even the wind has a haunting silence about it. It is *silent*...so silent in the desert.

And I have been to the Holy Land, where Jesus was of course. The silence there was just as haunting, just as complete. I cannot even begin to imagine having to suffer and endure such silence for forty *minutes* – forty *seconds*! – let alone forty *days*.... And yet, Jesus *did*.

And we notice that it was only *after* forty days of silence in the desert that Jesus *finally* speaks His very first words in Saint Mark's Gospel account, "This is the time of fulfillment. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel." And thus began His public ministry, at long last.... And it all began...with silence.

Sadly, silence is a most precious commodity these days – almost completely lost and extinct, it seems! We simply have no clue anymore *how* to be silent – absolutely no clue whatever as to how utterly crucial silence truly is for healthy, holy, human life and flourishing. I read one time that why there is so much violence in the world is because *nobody* can stand – not even for five minutes – to be silent in the solitude of their own personal company. We might each of us try that sometime; go to our bedrooms alone, leave all technology outside, leave all distractions outside (including books), close the door...and just *be*.... Could *I* possibly do that? Could *you*?

But even though silence is a most precious commodity these days – almost completely lost and extinct, it seems – I would submit to you that we *do* in fact have some sense of the importance of silence – at least insofar as we understand that silence can be *used* effectively and well. Consider, for example, the proverbial “pregnant pause.” Pregnant...as in very large! Pregnant...as in full of life! Silence is no mere *absence* of noise. Much like peace (not merely the *absence* of conflict but also the *presence* of justice), silence too is a *presence* – a presence of a mysterious...*something*.... A presence of *God*. Remember the Prophet Elijah in the cave on that mountain, how God was *not* in the wind, or in the earthquake, or in the firestorm...but in “a light *silent* sound.”

Silence is very large, very full of life – very *fruitful*. But really, in order for silence truly to be fruitful for *us*, it *must* be deliberate, it *must* be engaged, it *must* be utilized to its full potential. Silence is no mere *nothing* but rather a tool, a conduit, a portal that gains us access directly to God – directly to the Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ – but *only* if we would *use* that tool, *only* if we would actually *open* that portal – allowing ourselves to be bothered with having to suffer and endure that dreaded *silence!*

We have heroes of silence who can show us *how* to do this. We already considered Christ in the desert; there is also Saint Joseph, who says *not...one...word*.... And yet, Saint Joseph is one of the most consequential figures in all of salvation history. We might consider also, in our own day, those great prayer warriors who *I* am convinced are the *only* people who are saving this world from its own complete and utter self-destruction – the silent prayer warriors of the Carthusians, for example, who take vows of silence so as to encounter the Lord and save us from hell – their vow of silence a tool, a conduit, a portal that gains them access directly to God.

But you know, we do not have to be the foster-father of Jesus Christ in order to experience the profoundly blessed peace of silence. We do not have to be Carthusians. We have the Mass; we have the liturgy of the Church, and the liturgy of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass actually mandates a *lot* of silence throughout. And thankfully, I for one like to think that we actually do pretty darn well at it here at Saint Peter...and I *also* know that we have *lots* of room for improvement!

The Mass calls for a moment of silence after the priest celebrant says, “Let us pray.” This is when the opening Collect is prayed at the beginning of Mass. The Rite actually instructs us that “all pray in silence with the priest for a while” after the priest says, “Let us pray.” For this reason I have instructed all of our altar servers *not* to bring the Roman Missal to the priest for the opening Collect until *after* the priest says, “Let us pray,” so that the time it takes for an altar server to get the Roman Missal and bring it up to the priest builds in a natural span of time for silent prayer.

The Mass calls for silence before each of the Scripture readings, that we may silently prepare ourselves to receive the Word of God when the Word is proclaimed. For this reason I have worked with Greg and our lector ministry to be appropriately slow, solemn, and reverent in their movement to and from the ambo so as to build in, once again, a natural span of time for silent prayer.

The most *obvious* silence in the Mass here at Saint Peter of course is after Holy Communion, when everyone is returned to the pews, and all of the Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion have taken their ciboria back to the altar or have taken their chalices to the sacristy...and there I am at the altar “washing the dishes.” No, I am *not* washing the dishes; but with a prayer of purification, what I am doing is purifying the sacred vessels, taking utmost care that every remaining fragment of the Sacred Body of the Lord in the Communion Hosts is collected in water and consumed from the principal chalice. And what I am praying there at the altar as I am doing this – that is, the prayer of purification – reads: “What has passed our lips as food, O Lord, may we possess in purity of heart, that what has been given to us in time may be our healing for all eternity.”

There are *many* such instances of mandated silence throughout the Mass, and *all* of them are intended for us to use as tools, as conduits, as portals for us to reflect upon what we are doing here, what we have seen and heard, tasted and touched – prayer and reflections on the sublime mysteries of God...the glorious things of Heaven.

The silence of the Mass are times for personal prayer and reflection – but you know, there is one time for silence that *definitely* tends to be violated with reckless abandon, not just *here* but in *every*

parish, it seems: the silence that we need *before* Mass even begins. Here, at Saint Peter, we have that great, big narthex where we can gather, greet one another, and talk; we have that great, big hall right next to the narthex where we can gather, greet one another, and talk – we have all kinds of places in this very large parish complex where we can gather, greet one another, and talk...but *this* place here, this sacred place where we gather to worship at the altar of the Lord...this *needs* to be a place that is set apart, sanctified, reserved for prayer...for reflection...for *silence*. I quote Pope Francis – yes, the very pope who is renowned for being so talkative, so extroverted, so welcoming-at-all-costs, and so celebrated by *all* because of it... I quote *him*, who has recently said: “When we go to Mass, maybe we arrived five minutes before, and we start to chitchat with those [around us in the pews].” And yet, he says, “it is *not* a moment for chitchat. It is a moment of silence for preparing ourselves for dialogue [with the Lord], a time for the heart to collect itself in order to prepare for the encounter with Jesus.... Silence is so important.”

Silence *is* so important...*and* it is a lost art by and large; a most precious commodity; almost completely lost and extinct, it seems. It is high time for us to relearn that lost art – high time for us to treasure that precious commodity once again. And here we are at the beginning of Lent – maybe some of us still trying to figure out what will be our Lenten discipline this year. I, therefore, offer a suggestion: consider injecting more silence into your lives. Turn *off* the television; turn *off* all of the loud noises and talking heads – the CNN, the Fox News, the what-not. Turn *off* the iPhone, or the iPad, or the I...I know-not-what. Turn off *every* screen, *every* speaker, *every* needless sound. And go *on* a digital fast, an audio-visual fast, a fasting from every useless noise, every one and zero, so as to relearn *how*...to *be*...*silent*.

Because the Lord speaks to us in silence...but *can* we even *hear* Him...and *will* we even *try*?