

Mass Ringing in My Ears!

Glenn John Arnowitz

Okay, we all know how annoying cell phones are in public spaces. Always ringing in the wrong place at the wrong time. In restaurants, on trains, buses, in the middle of a movie. And the worst are the users who insist on speaking 10 decibels louder than the rest of us, sharing the intimate details of their lives with anyone in their path. Yes, we are desperately in need of an etiquette guide.

Now like most of us, I've learned to endure these space invasions, but I've got a big problem with people who forget to silence their cell phones during religious services. My wife and I attend weekly mass at our Catholic church in the lower Hudson Valley. Despite the large sign on the doors to the church reminding parishioners to turn off all their electronic devices, a service doesn't go by without ringtones flying through the incense-filled air. And it's always at the quietest moments of the service. Like when the organist takes a break or during communion. There's something about hearing the opening riff to Aerosmith's "Janey's Got A Gun" when you're walking down the aisle for communion that really ruins the moment for me. Every time I hear a phone go off, like a GPS, my ears track down the source. Then my head does a half turn in the direction of the ring, and I flash a disapproving look as I turn it back, kind of like Dana Carvey's "Church Lady," and say to my wife disgustedly, "I can't believe these people. What is it that they don't understand about turning their phones off!"

And then a few weeks ago it happened. My wife and I were at mass, sitting in the pew, trying desperately to stay focused on the homily by our pastor when right smack dab in the middle of his sermon, an electrified "When The Saints Go Marching In" comes blasting out of a cell phone scarily close to us. So close, in fact, it seems to be coming out of my wife's purse. We both freeze. I can't believe what I'm hearing. Not just the ringtone choice, but how loud it is. It is at this moment that we feel the eyes of everyone upon us—including the pastor's. "Bless me Father, for I have sinned..." I whisper under my breath. This is a major faux pas and one that will require more than a few Hail Marys. My first instinct is to gradually slide myself further away from my wife and pretend that we're not together. But like a good husband, I stay. But not without staring her down with the most disapproving gaze that I could muster up. My facial expression said it all. *Find that damn thing and turn it off!*

When we left the church that evening and got in our car, we both broke down and laughed hysterically at what just happened. We were now one of *those* people. The damned. Yes, the ones who breeze right past the sign on the front door, sit down in a pew, kneel and pray that we remembered to turn off all our electronic devices, only to find out that we forgot.

Glenn John Arnowitz is a creative director, musician and writer who no longer casts a nasty look when a fellow parishoner's phone goes off during mass.