

Children at Mass and at Home: Some Thoughts for Parents

To fellow parents out there,

With your little one at Mass, try sitting right up at the front if you can –and he lets you! He will be able to see all that is going on there and it will hopefully catch his interest. Try not to come late so you can get a good spot up front and you aren't rushing, so going to Church doesn't seem like a stressful, mad scramble, but a very prayerful, holy, enjoyable, even fun experience. Reward her for good behavior. Offer a treat or reward [make this offer before Mass], and he ONLY gets it if he is good. We used ice cream and chocolate chip waffles, but either way, it creates a positive feeling around going to Mass, and rewards good behaviour with something clearly positive.

In terms of snacks, we make it a rule that there is no food in Church. Most parishes don't allow food in the Church itself, but we also like to give the idea that the Church is a place set apart, and not a place for "common" food, drink, or snacks, but only for the Body and Blood of Jesus. You may be surprised at the effect this has on your little one as he comes to understand more and more, that this place is unlike any other place on earth. A holy place. A place for miracles. Jesus' special home on earth.

When entering and leaving our pew, or when walking before the tabernacle, we always genuflect reverently [not bow, unless the Blessed Sacrament is not there], and have our little ones do the same. We lovingly explain that the tabernacle is Jesus' "house" and that He is truly present there, explaining the red vigil candle as well. We sometimes go and kneel before the tabernacle at the end of Mass and encourage our kids to talk to Jesus in their own words, and to listen to Him. To tell him or ask him anything they want. We suggest that they could blow kisses goodbye to Jesus if they want, and to softly tell Him they love Him as they leave, even to wave goodbye.

Encourage quiet behaviour and no talking [maybe very quiet whispering if necessary] from a very early age. We were gently shushing our little ones with a finger to our lips consistently at every loud sound, even as early as 4 to 6 months or so. This helps prepare them to realize that Church is a special place, and reserved for quietness, reverence and especially good behaviour. Be super consistent with this right from an early age and it will be hugely helpful later. It's hard to teach little ones to all of a sudden be quiet and not do certain behaviour if you have been allowing it prior to this. Avoid the "Crying Room" if you can, but take your child out of the main church if he gets so noisy that he is seriously distracting others or

disrupting the Mass. It's a fine line between staying in Mass and taking a little one out when they get too noisy. A big fit/tantrum is a definite out though!

Your Parish priest may have advice on this too, and it helps if your priest encourages parishioners to be supportive and tolerant of little ones/young families – they are the future and need to be made to feel welcome and part of the Church – not glared at or the object of uncharitable comments, and made to feel they must sit at the back close to the “emergency exits”! “*Let the little ones come to me*”, Jesus reminds us.

Steve Wood has just an exceptional book entitled, “Legacy” [perhaps the best Catholic parenting book out there. It's written specifically for Dad's, but equally useful for Mom's. He also has a CD/MP3 series specifically geared towards helping with little ones at Mass. As a very successful Catholic Dad of nine, his advice and wisdom is priceless.

Try and have something fun to do AT Church for *after* Mass [our kids run around and play tag w/other kids and climb trees in the little court yard at Church, or go for coffee, juice and cookies in the hall, or go to the playground/swings/slides behind the Church at the School]. They have other kids they really look forward to seeing and playing with at/after Mass each week.

And try and constantly point out things happening in Mass and make them sound exciting and special – like Father processing at the start, the gifts being brought up [and remind your child to have their own Mass offering they can offer to Jesus with the gifts], the Gospel reading, the Priest washing his hands, the Precious Body and Blood being raised [and the bell of course!!!]. Encourage her to make “an act of faith” at this point, like saying, “MY Lord and my God” and bowing her head reverently to Jesus, just as you do.

At the collection, your child can give the envelope if he doesn't already. When you have more than one little one, they can take turns giving the envelope, but they can all put in their own coins in each week too, even from their own savings as they get older. Even a penny is a great start here. This is the perfect time to teach that everything we have, including our money, comes first from God's grace, and that it is good to give a portion back to Him in thanksgiving – and to give alms to help others.

Have some NEW Mass/church picture books [set aside especially for Mass, and maybe not looked at any other time] he can read or follow along with in Mass – you could even whisper the text to him if the book actually follows along with the parts of the Mass. Rotate them in and out often to keep them interesting. But no “ordinary” toys if you can manage it. Remember, the message you want to teach is that the

Church is set apart from the “ordinary”. “Quiet” Church toys can be okay if really needed – a Jesus figure, Mama Mary, Nativity scene, etc]. But it’s good to try and keep them involved in the Mass, rather than checked out with a toy. You want to help him understand that the Mass is a special, holy time, and the Church not just another play place – but a place set apart for Jesus and us to be together.

At home, get lots of Bible/church type videos. Used bookstores, Ebay, Church bookstores, etc, often have lots of old, cheap VHS children's Bible videos if you still have a VHS machine, but they have used DVD's too, just more expensive – lives of the Saints, Bible song sing alongs (these are great), Brother Francis, Veggie Tales are all good [but Veggie Tales can sometimes be scary and the message isn't always clear enough/well presented on some – especially for a 3-5 year old]. These videos substitute for TV in our home as we have found even the “kids” channels to be uneven, and very often not appropriate for what we are trying to teach – especially in the smart, disrespectful talk that seems the norm in so many children’s shows today.

Another option to consider is “Formed” – sort of a Catholic Netflix, but *infinitely* better. Our kids – in fact the whole family– loves it! And never underestimate what may catch the hearts and minds of your children, even at a young age. Our 7 and 8 year olds have sat enthralled during Scott Hahn presentations on the Eucharist, not wanting them to stop!

Consider getting some Bible adventure stories or kid’s Lives of the Saints books that you can read at night. Get books both with pictures, and longer stories with less or no pictures – books that you can read over several days if he'll sit still and get into them – so he's excited to find out what will happen next, but will have to wait for tomorrow night to find out – that sort of thing. If they'll hold his interest – they might not yet. But they will, so start collecting books now! Try Steve Wood's site [familylifecenter.net or Dads.org] and Ignatius Press for starters [some great lives of the Saints books here, written specifically for children].

Have lots of Church CD’s around as well. We try to create a Christian “atmosphere” or feel in our home, and play lots of kid’s Bible songs, and even “grown up” Christian music as well. Guys like Matt Maher [a Catholic, Canadian singer] have great songs, and our kids love to sing along. In the car, we keep a supply of Cat Chat and Holy Heroes CD’s – Catholic CD’s that teach lots of great things about the Faith through exciting stories and great, lively kids songs.

We also have lots of holy articles scattered throughout our home and bedrooms. Sacred Heart pictures, angel nightlights, Mama Mary statues, saints pictures,

candles for prayer times and special occasions [Advent wreath and others], etc. And consider getting a Holy Water font at the front door that you use each time you go out, or in his bedroom for nightly parental blessings [but don't let it become a common play thing or a "water splash toy"].

We also encourage our older kids [we started as early as they could read] to read their Bibles everyday just before bed [but any time can work] – just a few paragraphs to a chapter each night, with a special focus on the Gospels. We couple this with a daily prayer time and morning offering. We start by reading the Scripture readings from Daily Mass, and then give some applicable teaching to help explain the readings and relate them to daily life. We then finish with “quiet prayer time”: 10 minutes of spiritual reading for older kids [they pick books from a selection we give], 5 minutes of quiet Gospel reflection, Lectio Divina-style, and then 20 minutes of just quiet prayer spent talking [and listening!] to Jesus in their own words, all done outside in nature, weather permitting – and they love it!

We also try to get to daily Mass, and closely follow the Church liturgical year in our home, observing the various feasts and solemnities with special celebrations and meals. Solemnities always mean homemade cinnamon buns in our home, sometimes even a day off from school! And Baptismal “birthdays”, are also days of great family celebration, with Mass and meaningful spiritual gifts given too.

But I would add that you should beware of too many activities outside the home, especially organized sports, that, in some cases, have gone over the top on their demands on family time. I loved playing baseball, hockey and other sports growing up, but today, many families find themselves burning the candle at both ends, with little time to actually be a family, or spend time on Godly pursuits. It is possible to be too busy today – in activities where the good can become the enemy of the best. So I really encourage prudence here, good as all these activities may seem.

You should also be *extremely* wary of internet exposure. In my opinion, cell phones for kids, especially if they include internet access, are disasters waiting to happen. I can tell you horror stories of porn addiction and sexual activity – often at unheard of ages – undoubtedly triggered by internet exposure. Nightmare stuff that no family wants to ever go through. I can't encourage caution here strongly enough. Invest in internet monitoring/control options and be constantly vigilant. Lost innocence, even in exposure to images or text, can never be fully recovered. There is a period of innocence that God has made for all children and it must be guarded without compromise. The world's tolerance here does not excuse us in allowing these influences into our families. And parents must guard themselves as well. It's hard to be a moral leader and a teacher of the faith in your family if you yourself have fallen

under the influence of internet in some immoral way...

And finally, consider homeschooling. It has been one of the greatest things we have ever done, and the effect on family and faith life has been immeasurable. I cannot praise it highly enough. While many feel it to may be too daunting an undertaking, it is far from it, and actually makes many aspects of family life *much* easier. A side result has been that our kids have become each other's best friends. And many of the best families and kids I know are homeschooled, and I believe there is a direct link between the two.

If you have never considered this option, I urge you to at least explore the possibilities. Talk to a home school family in your parish and get their take on things. You don't need to be a professional teacher, or even a rocket scientist, to do this. And the online resources and classes available today are phenomenal, giving access to some of the best teachers in the world – but without the often negative influences and curriculum that can come in a public or even private school setting.

But again, the key is to try to create a Catholic atmosphere in your home – with everything you read, do, listen to and watch. Make it a family way of life to just submerge your little ones in the Faith at every level of daily family life. Seek first the Kingdom...

Graham Osborne