

Fortnight for Freedom Mass: better than fireworks

I suppose we could have gone to a parade in the sweltering heat or kept our boys up late to see fireworks.

But two weeks ago when I went to the Mass at Baltimore's Basilica to open the Fortnight for Freedom, I suggested to John that maybe we could make a family trip to the closing Mass yesterday in Washington, D.C. He thought it was a fantastic idea. Yesterday morning, though, he was feeling under the weather. So John stayed home while we joined my parents and my younger sister for a trip to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception.

We were hoping it would be well-attended, but it hadn't occurred to me just how crowded it could be. People were everywhere, spilling into the narthex and the side chapels, leaning against pillars, sitting on the floor, and just enjoying being part of the celebration.



Our boys were excited to see the huge American flag hanging from the Basilica's tower. Leo seemed curious about the monks' and sisters' different habits, and Daniel had to be lifted up for every holy water font so he could make his left-handed Sign of the Cross. They were both thrilled with the Basilica coins their grandfather bought for them before Mass.



We arrived early enough to get seats together, and then I took the boys to visit some of the statues at the side altars. I was hoping they would be as excited to visit the Our Lady of China mosaic as I was, but Leo told me all he really wanted to do was climb to the top of the tower. I couldn't figure out how to do that—and I'm not sure it was even open. Still, we walked enough that we could have gone up the tower at

least a dozen times before the final hymn.



It was a beautiful and inspiring Mass—at least the parts of it I could appreciate while working to keep our boys content. They sat quietly for a half hour before the Knights of Columbus started marching up the aisle. “They are knights, Mama?” Leo asked, craning his neck to see their hats. “Knights who fight things?” Then we watched what must have been 200 priests—it could easily have been more—processing in, followed by the bishops and archbishops, including our very own Archbishop Lori, and Cardinal Wuerl.



As we finished the second reading, I realized the boys had been sitting still for more than an hour, and they weren’t just restless. They were tired. They both wanted to read the same book. They both wanted to sit on my lap—and they weren’t willing to share the space. I have been told not to worry so much about how disruptive we might be to those around us, but I was getting too frustrated to stay in our pew. We went for a walk.

Fortunately, the Basilica has plenty of alcoves and places to discover. We smiled at other children we met, Leo asked a few questions (“Mama, is that girl chewing bubble gum?”), we lit a candle, and we threw pennies in a fountain at the foot of a statue of Mary holding the Infant Jesus. Finally I took the boys downstairs to the café, bought lemonade, and let them sit and have a drink. It wasn’t exactly how I had pictured our Mass experience—I had hoped to hear some of the homily—but I could also appreciate that I was pushing the boys through their usual naptime. So we improvised, and my expectations for how they should behave steadily plummeted.

By the time we returned to the Mass, it was time for the Consecration. I knelt in the back. The boys? Well...they didn’t run away. They lay next to me on the cool church floor, overtired but happy. Their only complaints came when it was time to receive Communion. Then I found I had one son quietly whimpering because we had passed

a holy water font without stopping and another asking softly, “Why didn’t the priest give me a blessing?”

At the end of Mass, as we watched the priests walk back down the aisle, a kind lady turned and smiled at me. She commented that she had seen me with the boys and said they had done well. As it turned out, she was a mother of two boys, now in their 20s, and she said she wished they had come with her.

I told her that I had thought about not coming—or not bringing our sons. But I wanted to be there, and I wanted my boys to experience not just going to Mass on the Fourth of July, but also the opportunity to see so many priests and religious gathered to pray.



What I didn’t say—but thought later—was that even though our preschoolers don’t understand what freedom means now, they will understand soon enough. Then the lady said something like “That was quite a scuffle back there,” and nodded toward the back of the Basilica. Oh, dear, I thought. We really were noisy. I need to do a better job with the children. Maybe I shouldn’t even have brought them. How did I think I could handle them both myself during a Mass lasting more than two hours? I almost started apologizing and then realized she was saying something about a sign.

It turned out a group of people—not protestors—had carried a huge banner into the church and were escorted out. Aha. That scuffle. I missed that. It must have happened while I was downstairs with my boys, maybe about the same time Daniel ran over to point to a statue outside the gift shop.

Sure, we could have celebrated our new U.S. citizen’s first Independence Day with a parade or fireworks. But it would be hard to top the moment when he grinned up at a statue of the Sacred Heart and shouted, “Big Jesus!”

The photos were taken by my sister, Treasa Beyer, who remembered to bring her camera.