

# Let the little children come to Mass

Not so long ago my husband and I had two little children who couldn't sit still during Mass. They wriggled and giggled and crawled and climbed and dropped hymnals and asked questions a little too loudly.

They also happily dipped their fingers into the holy water fonts, noticed absolutely everything, and acted out the Consecration at home with their stuffed animals. As challenging as it can be to bring children to Mass, I was constantly surprised with how they were experiencing our—and their—faith.

Over time I came to see that children at Mass aren't Catholics in training. They are Catholics. They are already members of our community. As one of our favorite priests once said, "Children aren't the future of the Church. They *are* the Church."

We shouldn't exclude them from the Mass anymore than we should exclude any other person on a faith journey. Our Church is open to all.

I am sure that when Father Michael White wrote his piece on why his parish doesn't encourage little children to attend Mass, he wasn't trying to be exclusive or unwelcoming. My understanding is that his parish is extremely welcoming.

But parents of young children know how challenging it is to find a church where their children are included. They have seen those angry glances, fielded negative comments, and often been their own harshest critics. Parents need to know there is room for their children at Mass—that they are truly included. If there are great nurseries or children's programs they want to take advantage of, fine. But those should be an option, not a requirement.

The Mass isn't a performance. It is a gathering for all of us. All are welcome in this place, and all are welcome to come as we are. Having children sitting near you might be distracting. But we are not meant to come to Mass in isolation. We don't come for peace and quiet. We come for community. We come to be challenged and awakened and to interact with our fellow Catholic Christians. We are all part of the Body of Christ.

This Sunday we heard from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians at Mass, "But God has so constructed the body as to give greater honor to a part that is without it, so that there may be no division in the body, but that the parts may have the same concern for one another. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy."

We are in this together—people of all ages and abilities and backgrounds.

When our children were little, my husband and I didn't take our boys to Mass every weekend. Sometimes we kept them home and took turns. Sometimes we took them and sat on opposite sides of the church so we could separate them. We sat in cry rooms and paced the narthex. I am sure I missed a few lines from a homily or two, but my faith was certainly enriched by seeing the Mass through our children's eyes.

Now that our children are a relatively sedate 9 and 11, I love seeing the children around us at Mass. A crying baby or a squirming toddler or a preschooler who asks a loud question doesn't disrupt my faith journey. In a blink of an eye, those children will be my sons' ages, and my boys will be like those towering teens a few rows in front of us.

Parents, please bring your little ones to Mass. The Church is stronger thanks to you and your children. I'll save you a seat—and you can sit on the end in case you need to make a quick escape.