

Parishes explore best options at Mass for families with children

TRENTON, N.J. – It is Sunday morning and Sally and Tom are preparing to take their three children – 6-year-old Abby, 3-year-old Matthew and 1-year-old Joey – to Mass.

Armed with a survival bag containing sandwich bags filled with Cheerios, three miniboxes of raisins, Matthew’s teddy bear, Joey’s blanket and teething ring, diapers, an emergency bottle and a few children’s books, the family can opt to be seated in the assembly or in the rear of the church, in case they need an easy exit with an unhappy child.

Or, if theirs is a church with a separate space often called a “cry room,” they can opt for the place away from the congregation.

Cry rooms, places meant to help parents soothe or quiet upset or misbehaving infants and young children, may seem like an obvious solution to a challenging problem. Yet, opinions are mixed on their effectiveness and how they impact the community.

Many parishes do their best to welcome everyone at Sunday liturgy and to serve the needs of families with young children while preserving a positive worship experience for all.

“The main concern of church leadership is that all those present have the right to participate in the action of the liturgy,” said Mercy Sister Eleanor McCann, associate director of the Office of Worship in the Diocese of Trenton.

The church’s leading documents related to liturgy and church construction do not

make any “stipulation about removing a child from the Mass,” she said. Even so, sensitivity to other worshippers sometimes warrants a parent removing a child from the assembly.

In the era before the Second Vatican Council, a timeout usually meant an embarrassingly long walk to the foyer, and parent and child would be behind heavy wood doors without any kind of sound system, separated from the assembly and the liturgy.

In the late 1960s, the Vatican II changes introduced a new kind of church building: semicircular rather than rectangular, with shorter aisles, sections of pews that allowed greater visibility of the altar, and a cry room.

Set adjacent to the congregation, the cry room provided a convenient place for parents to calm an unhappy or misbehaving child. A window and speakers let parents see and hear the liturgy.

“It provides a pressure-valve release,” said Marge McGinley, pastoral administrator at Sacred Heart Parish in Mount Holly, N.J. “It takes pressure off the parent and the child without excluding them from the liturgy.”

“We call it the ‘quieting room,’ where parents can hear and participate at Mass without making others feel uncomfortable,” Ms. McGinley told *The Monitor*, newspaper of the Trenton Diocese. “But we do not consider it a permanent place for families with small children.”

Parishes where cry rooms are used successfully often regard them as a place to introduce very young children to the Mass, with the expectation that as soon as possible they will sit with the congregation.

“Our cry room is used by families with children age 3 and younger,” said Father Tim

Capewell, pastor of St. David the King Parish in West Windsor. A weekday chapel is converted into a cry room for weekend Masses.

“We thank God for it,” he said. “People who use the room form friendships and bond because they have children of the same age and share a lot of common experience.”

Problems arose in some parishes when the cry room was treated as the only place for young families to be. As soon as parents with children age 5 and under entered the church, ushers automatically opened the door to the cry room and directed them inside, so the parents felt unwelcome.

Or in some cases adults without children occupied the room, then complained when parents came in with small children.

Monsignor Ronald Bacovin, pastor of St. James Parish in Pennington, said his parishioners would not consider including a cry room in renovation plans for their church.

“Cry rooms are not only noisy but none of the parents had time to focus on the liturgy or could hear or even see what was going on at the Mass,” he said. “When one child starts to cry or talk to another, the others pick it up.”

“They became playrooms,” said Father Sam Sirianni, director of the diocesan Office of Worship and pastor of St. Robert Bellarmine Parish in Freehold.

“There was no training happening for how to go to Mass,” he said. “Some parents refused to take their children to the cry room because they could not train them to behave appropriately at Mass. Children must be trained to sit still and pay attention at Mass. It must be instilled.”

In recent years, many parishes have created children’s liturgies or programs for

children age 3 and up that include readings written for their level and activities based on them.