

Take your children to church (but don't feed them in the pew)

I should know better than to sit behind small children in church – as adorable and entertaining as they are, they distract me from Mass.

The young mom in front of me last Sunday had a lunchbox larger than her purse sitting on the pew. In spite of the posted sign in the vestibule: NO FOOD & DRINK INSIDE THE CHURCH, in less than 15 minutes into the Mass, she had fed her kid a baby bottle full of milk (although the child looked 5 years old), an apple juice in a squeezy container (a pew mess waiting to happen), and a mini bag of grape fruit snacks. I knew what was next – whatever the contents were of that Ziploc baggy sticking out of the lunchbox. Inside the lunchbox from a standing position, I spied additional bribes: a stash of crayons, an activity book, and Goldfish crackers.

Were these rewards for a fidgety child – or her breakfast???

What are we teaching our kids about attending church armed with food and drinks – that it's like snack time at Kindergarten? That they cannot possibly be expected to last ONE WHOLE HOUR without eating and drinking? That they are not required to even try to pay attention to learn about our Catholic faith?

Listen, I raised four kids – I get it. They get bored during Mass. They don't want to be there, they were dragged in, and their young intellects cause an inability to focus on the Mass proceedings and words to the homily. And – they are a distraction to the parents wanting to pray.

Yet I don't think *feeding and watering* kids is the answer to acclimating them to the ritual of attending Mass. When we were growing up under stricter church rules, we could not eat or drink inside church, nor before Mass by one hour, or one hour after consuming a Host. How would today's toddlers feel about leaving home their juice boxes and Cheerios?

Even into their teens as I forced my kids to attend church with us, I told them amidst their *why-why-why* grumblings, "This is what we do on Sundays as a family." Period.

They were going to church. Period. They got up, ate breakfast, and dressed – sullenly, but they did it. They knew the dispute wasn't winable.

When they were smaller, I don't remember bringing apple juice and Goldfish to shut them up as they asked aloud in church, *"When's it gonna be over, Mommmmmmy?"* A stern look or whisper often curtailed them – not a fruit snack. Maybe I'd allow them to tote along a book, yet it was their cutely-illustrated children's Bibles or a religious story. I encouraged them to participate in the children's Liturgies at our former parishes of St. Joseph's Church, Cockeysville; and the Catholic Community of St Francis Xavier, Hunt Valley. That was more their speed since it involved crayons and Jesus cartoons. (But I bet the teachers didn't serve snacks!)

Taking our children to church is highly encouraged. They are impressionable and hopefully the practice will be habit-forming as they grow up. (Oh, please don't ask if my adult kids attend church. See *Where did I go wrong with my children's faith?*)

I commend the aforementioned mom for bringing along her little one to experience Mass – I do. I've seen them together in church often. Yet I think parents need to be cautious as to the message they're creating with distractions of milk and Cheerios as they attempt to teach their children about God.

So absolutely, take your children to church ... but please don't feed them in the pew.