

The most perfect form of prayer

By Rita Buettner

Our children don't always want to go to Mass, but they like pretending to celebrate Mass in our living room. They get crackers and water from the kitchen, line up their stuffed animals in rows on the floor, and pick one as the priest and one as the deacon. Then they announce that all phones must be turned off.

They know that is how Mass begins.

One Sunday, as they reached the penitential rite, the "priest" told the congregation to call to mind their sins. Without warning, our kindergartener's raven puppet - who was serving as the deacon - swooped down.

"You have sinned!" he called out, tapping a stuffed animal near him. "And you have sinned, and you have sinned!" he said tapping the others in turn. The raven, it seems, has a bit to learn about mercy and reconciliation.

But even though our children don't know the Mass by heart, they bring a vibrant joy to their celebration. The Eucharist is always the highlight. As they re-enact the consecration, they lift the bread and wine and sing, "Take this, all of you, and eat of it."

As I watch them pretending to celebrate Mass, I marvel at how - even at an early age - they are embracing this ceremony that is at the heart of our Catholic faith. When we take them to church, I'm not always sure they are listening, learning, praying and participating. In fact, some days it's difficult to focus on everything myself. But even when they are wriggling in their seats or dropping the hymnal for the third time in a row, they are obviously gaining more from the experience than I think they are.

Even at their most distracted, our children are absorbing the seeds of our faith that will sprout over time and grow - my husband and I hope - into a beautiful faith they can carry with them into the future.

Although they might squirm and occasionally whisper, “Is it almost over?” during Mass, they also seem to recognize that what happens in that sacred space is truly special and important. Why else would they pretend to hold their own little Mass in our living room?

Something about it speaks to them - just as it speaks to each of us. Isn't it extraordinary that during the consecration, we are as close to heaven as we will ever be on earth? That in that instant we are joined by all the angels and saints - including our loved ones who have already gone on to eternal life? That we are participating in a celebration that is thousands of years old? That we take Jesus into ourselves in the Eucharist?

Miracle upon miracle upon miracle.

“The Mass,” Blessed Pope Paul VI said, “is the most perfect form of prayer.”

When I pause and try to see the Mass through my children's eyes, I catch a glimpse of its wonder and mystery. And I realize that if I fail in many other ways this Lent - a given - maybe, just maybe, I can focus on drawing closer to Christ by immersing myself in the beauty of the Mass.

After all, the only one I need is on the altar, inside the tabernacle, and waiting for me to receive him in the Eucharist.

Overwhelmed with God's goodness, St. Teresa of Avila asked him, “How can I thank you?” He replied simply, “Attend one Mass.”

As we walk toward Easter - in prayer and fasting and reflection, perhaps you have given up something or taken on something additional. Maybe you're just trying to view life through a different lens, seeking out opportunities to speak more often to Jesus in prayer. I hope whatever path you are taking helps you draw closer to Jesus.

As for me, I'll be joining my wiggly, somewhat distracted Massgoers as we seek Jesus in his house.

Then, back at home, I'll have to encourage that raven puppet to learn about mercy - and maybe practice praying the Confiteor.

Read Buettner's blog, Open Window, here.