

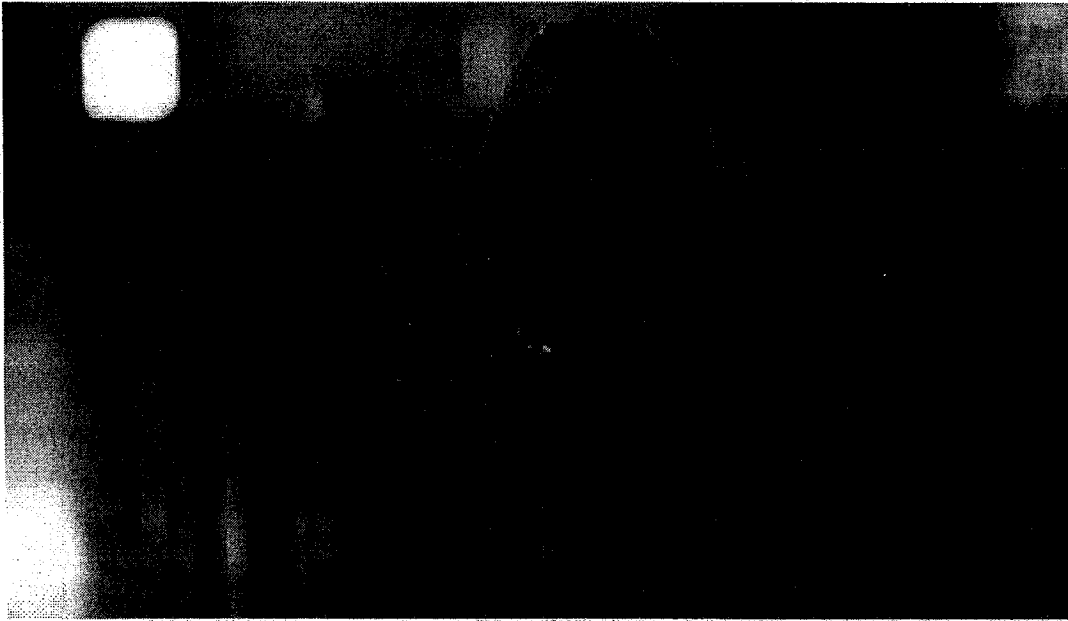
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Why Are Young Families Not Going to Mass?

by Vicki Thorn

There was a Religious News Service article in our local paper this summer that stopped me in my tracks. The piece, by Cathy Lynn Grossman, began with these saddening words: "Most of today's American Catholic parents don't go to Mass, provide any Catholic education for their children or stress the basic sacraments beyond baptism."

Reporting on a recent survey conducted by Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) and commissioned by Holy Cross Family Ministries, the article noted, among other things, that "53 percent of parents attend Mass at least once a month — slightly better than Catholic adults overall (43 percent)."



Barely half of all Catholic parents attend Mass *at least once a month!* How many or how few, then, actually attend weekly?

It's not really news that many baptized Catholics fall away from the practice of the faith and don't attend Mass, or do so irregularly at best. Yet it occurred to me that in this time of the New Evangelization we need to get more serious in doing something about it. We need to reach out more to lapsed Catholics, but we also need to make sure children and young families are formed in the habit of attending Mass. We need, therefore, to start at home, literally and figuratively.

I began wondering if things had changed so radically since we were raising our children a generation ago. In the faith community we belonged to in those days, Catholic families took their children to church most weeks. We had a parochial school, and many of the children of the parish attended that school as well. It seemed to me that if children are taken to Mass regularly when they are young, then perhaps they will be more likely to take their own children to Mass when they are young parents themselves someday.

The CARA report that was the subject of the RNS article stated that “68 percent of Catholic parents do not take their children to a Catholic school, parish religious training or even a Catholic youth ministry,” a figure that is “significantly less than in previous generations.”

Despite these depressing figures about Mass attendance and Catholic formation, the article finds a “positive side” in that 76 percent of parents “say they pray every day — and they pray first and foremost for the well-being of their family.” Yet even there exists a concern: Most parents pray alone. Only about 1 in 4 actually prays with his or her family.

Since the question about Mass attendance troubled me so, I turned to social media to help me figure it out. I posed the question about attending Mass to members of a local Catholic mothers group on Facebook... and it touched off a firestorm of interest! When I printed out all the responses, they went on for 21 pages.

Now let me clarify that this Facebook group is open to any woman who identifies herself as a Catholic mother and wishes to share ideas with others who also self-identify in this way. Their responses to my question included many reflections and much dialogue with one another. I was shocked at the number of responses, but also by the passion that was stirred in their hearts!

Many within this group said they try to attend Mass regularly, but have difficulty finding a congregation where small children are welcome. They struggle with the expectation that their kids need to be perfect — well dressed, prompt in arrival, and exemplary in behavior during Mass. A couple of mothers spoke at length about the anxiety they feel in bringing their kids to Mass and then sensing the critical eye of others in the assembly when their children fidget or cry. They get too concerned about their kids’ behavior that they can’t focus on the Mass themselves. Some women say they have encountered outright hostility from people at Mass! A few mentioned feeling hostility as well from priests who make it clear their children are a distraction and a bother.

One mom wrote:

You get a nasty look or comment... Our culture does not welcome children... I’m sure you’ve seen that [local] restaurant that doesn’t allow children under 7... and like with many other aspects of our culture, our parishes are not different. The culture of death has taken hold... Children are not viewed as a blessing in our parishes... You can feel it!

One friend shared that her friend does not take her children to church because she is embarrassed by them making noise. Another said her friends say things like “It’s not worth it! I can’t even hear the homily. What’s the point?” Another friend said she hears friends who skip Mass or leave their kids at home say things like, “God will understand,” “Mass is so long and boring for kids,” and “I don’t need to be in a building to pray!”

Some women observed that the crying room in their church feels like an isolation ward. There is no window and no speaker to hear what is happening. It seems futile to attempt to get anything out of Mass there. Again, why bother going?

A couple of people made the interesting observation that, in some Catholic parishes, hospitality is viewed as being “Protestant”! One shared that they had quit trying to go to Mass and now worshiped in a Protestant community where they were made to feel welcome and where there were other families with young children. Sadly, many former Catholics have followed that route out of the Catholicism.

A couple mothers talked about how hard it is to take little kids to church by themselves, because of husbands who work weekends or do not share the faith. They also observed the obvious: It is easier to take young children to a Mass that lasts 45 minutes rather than an hour.

Some moms suggested that her parish designate one of the early-morning Masses for those who want quiet, since families with very young children usually don't attend early liturgies. Some Catholics, bewilderingly, believe children should not come to Mass at all. One woman shared this disturbing comment: "My dad is very vocal about his opinion that children should not be at Mass. He feels that he has earned the right to a quiet, peaceful church experience." She added that she once wrote an article about how to pray in church with restless children, and her father responded "by writing a poem about how much he loves Mass and how people (children) who aren't prepared to take it all in respectfully should come back later."

That is an example of the attitudes and obstacles young mothers and families with small children face in trying to attend Mass. Other mothers in the Facebook group shares stories of encountering a more warm and loving reception from fellow Catholics in the pew.

Some women expressed how they were deeply touched by the kindness of people in their parishes who offer words of encouragement for bringing their children to church. They, too, spoke of how hard it is for them to come with their children sometimes because they are distracted by their own children and don't feel they are able to get anything from the readings and the homily. The welcoming spirit of others worshipers helped them feel at home.

One woman spoke about how touched she was every Sunday when the ushers talk to her toddler son and are clearly delighted to have him there. Another woman talked about a parish where the teens offered to help families with little kids as part of an organized outreach.

In a parish I attended, I observed a large family, one with several teenage sons and daughters, reach out to a family with a toddler and a baby by offering to hold the little ones during Mass. The toddler clearly was familiar with this family and particularly liked one of the teen sons who looked like a burly football player but held her with great gentleness and entertained her so that her parents could better participate in the Mass. These were teens who were comfortable with little children! (I'm certain some readers are holding their breath and mumbling "stranger danger" to themselves, but let me repeat that this was a family known to the youngsters' parents; furthermore, the other family with teens sat in the pew in front of the family with the little kids, so all were close at hand and well supervised.)

Some congregations have catechists who take the young children out for a time to study the Gospel at a child's level. Some parishes have children's Masses. One woman in the Facebook group spoke of the joy she and her children experienced in attending a Mass that was planned by the school kids.

Among all the comments in reply to my question to the Catholic mothers group, I found this observation the most moving:

After sharing with my mother-in-law my struggle about not getting to pay attention as I'd like to at Mass anymore (now having little ones to take care of), she kindly reminded that even if you can't hear/see everything that is going on, God is doing things to my heart. That coupled with just beginning to understand that receiving the Eucharist is the most important part of Mass. I have found so much peace no matter what my girls may be doing, or the possible looks of the person behind me.

How can we be more welcoming to families with small children at Mass? What could our parish do to make it easier for them to attend Mass and feel at home?

If we have a lot of families, maybe a family Mass could be instituted. Having catechists take the little ones out for study during the Gospel and homily may provide a little respite for parents. How about us? Do we personally reach out to families? Do we speak words of encouragement to them? (The elderly ladies in our parish used to bring paper and pencils for our kids some Sundays and just drop them off in the pew with a smile!)

The bottom line is that if we don't take our children to Mass when they are little, they are not likely to come to Mass when they are older. The future of our Church depends on helping young families worship with their children. Without those children, there is no Church in the future.

Someone once said to me that faith is as much caught as taught. We go a long way to helping children "catch" the Catholic faith by helping them feel welcome and cherished in our parish community.

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(The views expressed in this column are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the positions of Catholic Pulse or the Knights of Columbus.)
