

Children at Mass

Many parishes in this diocese choose the option of celebrating a distinct Liturgy of the Word for children at Sunday Mass. The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops recognises the beauty of occasional use of this celebration in their publication *Celebrating the Liturgy of the Word with Children: Guidelines for Practice*. It takes a lot of preparation, skill, and resources to celebrate a children's Liturgy of the Word well. Few of us are aware that it is only recommended for occasional use, not weekly. The value of routine notwithstanding, the rightful place of children is in the assembly. Moreover, to celebrate children's Liturgy of the Word weekly as well puts undue pressure on the people who coordinate and lead the celebration.

Indeed, at most Masses, children are among the assembly for the entire liturgy. The Mass has always been intended for all ages. It has been the tradition of the Church since the beginning to baptise infants. Therefore, those of us preparing the liturgy should consider the rightful place of all the baptised, including children, at Mass, including the Liturgy of the Word.

This article offers some suggestions and considerations for acknowledging the baptismal dignity of young people at Mass and for calling forth their gifts and their ability to understand. The ideas presented here are by no means exhaustive. Give them a try and allow them to stimulate your own thinking and practice in the parish.

Parent

- **Sit up front.** Parents often sit at the back so as not to draw attention to themselves and their potentially disruptive children. However, children will be less frustrated if they can see what is going on at the altar and more engaged in the ritual action.
- **Pique their curiosity.** Ask children before Mass to listen for the prayer that they say at home, e.g. the "Our Father". You can also ask children age-appropriate

questions to engage them in the action: what do they think it means when the priest lifts up his arms? How do they understand the meaning of ritual elements in the Mass like incense, bells, water sprinkled, and the sign of the cross? Be prepared to share your own understanding with your children.

- **Storytelling.** Read with your children the Gospel of the day in advance from a children's bible with pictures so that the story they hear will already be familiar to them.

Parish

- **Ministries.** It's a common complaint that the same people fill all the ministries. An untapped resource for ministries is the young people in the parish.
- **Get to know young people individually,** through parish groups, or by organising a ministry event for youth. Find out their interests and gifts and give them a chance to be involved in a ministry. Whether you have invited young people into ministries as a group or individually, follow up. Ask them how they are enjoying the ministry. If it is not a good fit, respond with understanding and suggest alternatives. Sometimes trial and error helps the young person identify his or her gifts. Also, difficulties may arise in terms of transportation or coordinating with the family. Some examples:
 1. *Lectors:* need only have received their First Communion. Students, who enjoy drama class, often make confident and effective proclaimers of the Word
 2. *Eucharistic ministers:* Young people who have been confirmed and have a sense of reverence for the Eucharist can serve as Eucharistic ministers. It is a beautiful sight to see communion distributed by younger members
 3. *Hospitality:* People of all ages can welcome, mingle, and serve refreshments. Even infants can be held and present a welcoming face to those arriving for Mass

4. *Music ministry*: It is not necessary to have a children's choir. Many young people study music and can sing or play as part of the parish's music ministry
5. *Serving as a family*: Families can be scheduled together to serve at the altar, to be the readers, to serve as Eucharistic ministers, and as a hospitality team

Pastor

- **Homily**. Consider preaching a children's homily once a month. Come down to the level of the assembly, gather the children around, and maybe sit. Use props or a dialogical approach. Chances are you'll have the adults at least as engaged as the children.
- **Schools**. The presence of the priest in the schools helps make the connection between liturgy and life for young people.
- **Blessings**. Our liturgical tradition includes many special blessings and paraliturgical celebrations. These rituals also tangibly connect the liturgy to our material lives. When days associated with these rituals fall during the week, consider promoting a weeknight liturgy for families to attend or repeat the blessing for the Sunday Masses. Some examples include the blessing of candles on the Feast of the Presentation, the blessing of Throats the next day, the blessing of animals on the Feast of St. Francis, or the blessing of Easter baskets after liturgies on Easter Sunday. Different cultures incorporate additional blessings, which may be appropriate for your community: the Eastern Catholics bless fruit on the Feast of the Transfiguration; in Latin America, animals are blessed on the Feast of St. Martin de Porres.

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