

How can I get more out of Mass while wrangling with kids?

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Q: As a parent, I find it really difficult to get anything out of Mass when I have to wrangle and take care of my kids through it all. Sometimes it seems like it would just be better to stay home; I don't get anything out of it, and it seems like they don't either. I usually end up feeling defeated. What should I do?

A: Thank you so much for sharing your situation and this question. You have just described the experience of probably every single Catholic parent who has ever brought their children to Mass. You show up stressed, you sit there stressed, every time your child makes a sound it adds to the stress. In addition, having to take them out of Mass is a challenge in and of itself. When do you take them out? For how long? When do you come back? If your parish even has a cry room, many parents treat it as a play room, so you feel like you can't even go there. I completely understand why you would be tempted to believe that it is all just a waste of time.

But if we understood one thing clearly, I believe that it would change everything about how we approach the Mass.

I will ask people this question all of the time (so much that I start to wonder if they are sick of my asking). It is this: What is the heart of religion? For many of us, we might say that the most important part (or the heart) of religion is the creed — what we believe. While the creed is incredibly important, it isn't the heart of religion. Others might argue that the heart of religion is morality — how we behave. That too is very important, but it isn't the heart.

I would maintain that the heart of religion is worship. The creed and morality direct and serve worship. What we believe about God and what constitutes a good life is oriented towards the act of worship. In every world religion, worship has been the central and most important action a people could participate in.

Worship is the thanks, praise, and honor we give to God. And for virtually all of human history, the heart of worship has been sacrifice. What is that precious and valuable thing that one is called to offer to God out of love? Of course, the Bible makes it clear that the sacrifice that God desires is a humble and contrite heart. But this heart of contrition and obedience is expressed through the concrete action of offering a valuable sacrifice.

So, if the heart of religion is worship ... and the heart of worship is sacrifice, then we realize that going to Mass (the most perfect form of worship we have been given) has nothing to do with what I get out of it. In fact, it is the opposite. The point of the Mass is all about what I can give.

The primary gift (sacrifice) that we offer to God the Father is the once for all sacrifice of the Son. When the bread and wine truly become the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ, we offer him to the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is why the "high point" of the Mass is not the moment of transubstantiation (the miracle by which the bread and wine become the Body and Blood), nor is it the moment of Communion (although there is no greater moment of vulnerability and unity with God than this). The high point of the Mass is when the priest elevates the Eucharist, and, speaking to the Father, prays, "Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, almighty Father, forever and ever." And all of the people say, "Amen!"

This is the moment the sacrifice is offered! This is the heart of the Mass!

So what does this have to do with wrangling children in church? Everything. What is every parent doing by bringing their rowdy children to Mass? They are making a huge sacrifice. Every parent who didn't get a moment to reflect or to pray or to listen to the readings or the homily is making a sacrifice. Every parent who had to fight with their children to get everyone in the car and on the way to Mass is making a sacrifice. Every parent filled with anxiety over whether or not their children will behave is making a sacrifice.

And what is the point of Mass? To offer the sacrifice. What every parent can do is take all of the sacrifices they are making for their spouse, for their children, for their parish and unite them to the One Great Sacrifice of Christ. Even if a person is distracted, they can offer the distraction (that's a sacrifice). Even if they are frustrated, they can offer the frustration (that's a sacrifice).

Get this, even the people who can't hear anything because someone else's children are making a fuss and causing a ruckus don't have to be upset. They get to offer that as a sacrifice. If the people next to you at Mass smell, or sing poorly, or look at you out of the corner of their eye, nothing to worry about and nothing to lament. All of those are opportunities for sacrifice. And sacrifice is the heart of worship.