

Take a fresh look at your family's role in Sunday Mass



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Whispers in The pew

One of the 2014 Archdiocesan Synod priorities is understanding the Mass. Catholic Herald Family, working with the synod implementation evangelization and Sunday Mass pastoral priority team, is publishing a six-part series designed to help parents teach their children about the Mass. This first part focuses upon the introductory rites.

Imagine it's Sunday. As Mass begins, all sorts of people pour into the church. From the beginning of time, God knew this particular group of people would gather to worship: restless toddlers, sweet ladies with rosary beads, well-dressed grandpas, poorly dressed loners, families, doubters, maybe some saints and lots of sinners. People who are friendly, rude, self-righteous, mentally ill, grieving, grateful or lost are gathering under one roof. God created each with love, in his own image.

Where are you on Sundays?

If you have young children, maybe you sit in the back for quick exits and potty breaks. Maybe you favor the cry room, because your parish has one of the "good" ones that doesn't make you feel like the whole family is in "timeout."

When all five of our children were at their peak noise level, we usually tried to hide near the back. One Sunday, when we were later to Mass than usual, we discovered— to our horror — that the only pews left were in front. We had three options: leave, stand in the back for an hour and chase the children, or make the long, terrifying journey to the front pew.

Opting bravely for the front pew, we were astonished at how

attentive our children became. Sitting so close to the altar helped them connect with and respond to the priest. Of course, if a spectacularly inattentive child needed to go out, the "walk of shame" took a lot longer from the front.

Maybe it's rough to get to Mass every weekend. Many families have only one parent, or only one Catholic parent, which makes a weekly trek to church nerve-racking.

Maybe the church experience seems important only at Christmas and Easter. Or perhaps your children attend Catholic school, and their weekday school Mass seems like it ought to "count" for Sunday.

But what is the Sunday Mass experience all about? Why does the church expect weekly attendance from all able-bodied Catholics when they surely know how hard it is to haul the whole family to church? And what if the liturgy feels boring, or the preaching seems irrelevant, or the music is painful?

This series on the family and Sunday Mass will take a fresh look at the liturgy and our families' role in it.

For starters, liturgy means "the work of the people." Even though the Mass is celebrated everywhere in the world on Sunday, we can't think of it as some giant machine that priests just set in motion. The Sunday Mass is our work. Each of God's children belongs at the Mass. Not a single soul is disposable.

Our work begins as we try our very best to simply show up and take our place. Our work continues as we accept everyone we see, acknowledging that God calls each of us here.

But what if I've been away for years? Or I don't look like everyone else? Or my kids are hyper? Or I have problems with a priest or the church?

"Come and see," Jesus says. He makes all things new. The experience of Mass comes first, then the learning. Come and see.

My favorite part of the beginning of Mass is the Collect — the opening prayer.

After the notes of the Gloria fade, the priest says, "Let us pray." Then he pauses. In silence, we consider our worries, cares, questions and concerns. We recall people who need our prayers.

In this hushed "collection" of our hearts and minds, we can offer this Mass for the good of others. The liturgy may be the work of the people, but God's busy too: in the next hour or so, God will transform our prayers and concerns into amazing, effective grace for the world. He will transform bread and wine, too, but that miracle comes later in our series.

(Grace is director of children's ministry for the Apostleship of Prayer, and author of "Pray with Me: Seven Simple Ways to Pray with Your Children" (Ave Maria Press). She and her husband, David, parents of five children, are members of St. Mary's Visitation Parish, Elm Grove. She can be contacted at gurbanski@apostlesipofprayer.org.

Action steps:

- Connect! Join a parish and commit to every Sunday Mass.
- Love! Be kind to everyone at church — even those who are irritating or distracting.
- Celebrate! Have clear expectations for children during Mass, and be consistent with consequences and rewards.